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Margaret Cooling

Preaching and the Revelatory Plot: An Alternative to the Resolution Plot in Narrative Preaching

Abstract

This thesis presents the case for the revelatory plot as a framework for narrative preaching. It offers an alternative to the resolution plot with its arc from conflict to climax and resolution and its emphasis on action and event. The revelatory plot is a more open form that prioritizes character and thought, with insights gained through earthed particulars. It is a minor plot form from literature and drama, but this thesis contends it is a significant form in some styles of art, from which preachers can learn. This synthesis of art, homiletics and the revelatory plot constitutes a new and deeply embodied approach.

A revelatory sermon form is developed that unfolds biblical narratives in order to expose emotional, physical, social-economic, political and spiritual realities that are frequently assumed but not stated in the text. This displays the faith of biblical characters practised in the complexities of life and creates a form of preaching where relevance is achieved through identification and recognition. The revelatory style uses language that carries a sense of the reality of God working in the everyday world and engages imagination in all its functions.

A cooperative hermeneutic — where author, text and reader create an arena to progress meaning — provides the hermeneutical underpinning. The epistemological foundation is a form of personal knowledge, and critical realism provides the philosophical standpoint. Theologically, this thesis draws on understandings of creation, the imago Dei and incarnation to affirm the material world and humanity as potential ways to learn about God. This is developed in a theology of revelation, with understandings of God coming through general revelation within an interpretive framework of special revelation. The central thesis is that sermons using a revelatory plot can deliver invitational, relevant and embodied preaching that affirms ordinary faith and embraces the complexity of Christian faith lived in the world.

Preaching and the Revelatory Plot: An Alternative to the Resolution Plot in Narrative Preaching

Margaret Cooling

Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD

Department of Theology and Religion

Durham University

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Abbreviations

Note: Unless otherwise stated all references are to the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicized edition.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband Trevor, for the many long walks spent discussing the issues this thesis raised, and to the congregation of St Mark, Cheltenham for their patience and support as I experimented with different forms of preaching.

Introduction

This thesis has two parts; the first part (chapters 1–4) puts forward the case for the revelatory plot, the second part (chapters 5–8) is a response to issues raised by this plot style. Both parts are prefaced by an overall outline of the argument of the chapters that follow. This structure is a result of the methodology used in this thesis, where the argument of the first four chapters is followed by the responses of the last four chapters.

The first two chapters outline two styles of plot — resolution and revelatory — using a theoretical methodology of review, analysis, classification, identification and explanation. Many of these skills are then applied to the theological foundations of this preaching style in later chapters. The theological foundations are identified as embodiment, the image of God, incarnation and revelation. Chapter three explores the role art can play in a revelatory approach using the thinking skills enumerated above alongside creative thinking and synthesis. The insights gained from the first three chapters are developed into a practical preaching model in chapter four.

The early location of the practical model within the overall thesis shows its significance in terms of posing questions for the rest of the thesis in areas such as language, imagination, hermeneutics, epistemology and theology. This way of working adapts a general methodological insight from practical theology without committing to a particular methodology from within the practical theology corpus. The insights concerned are around starting with praxis rather than applying theology to practice; practice and theology enter a dialogue.[1] Paul Ballard and John Pritchard emphasize that in practical theology the context is taken seriously as 'the root of and data for theological reflection'; it is theology that is concerned with practice and experience.[2] I have adapted and utilized this way of working by using a range of disciplines (theology, epistemology, linguistics, and hermeneutics) in dialogue with the practice detailed in chapter four. This is an adaptation of practical theology's contextual methodology.

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[1] Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church's Ministry* <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1151&context=sot_pubs> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 64, 68, 70–77, 81–82.

[2] Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 4, 9, 12, 16, 55, 58–60, 66–67.

The methodology used to create revelatory sermons starts with the narrative world and the realities of that world, the people and their situation. Theology is not applied to the narratives, rather the approach seeks to reveal the theology that is embodied in the narratives. This approach exposes emotional, physical, social-economic, political and spiritual realities and these become the data from which ideas and concepts arise in the form of insights. This is a way of expressing David Day's 'return journey'— a going back to the sense experiences that gave rise to the text.

The revelatory plot is a form that is able to deliver a deeply embodied and invitational style of preaching with relevance achieved through identification and a recognition that the sermon speaks to real life. This constitutes my central thesis. Relevance is woven throughout a revelatory approach; characters and situations are displayed in all their materiality in order that the congregation may recognize analogous situations or identify with people in the biblical narratives.

This thesis explores the revelatory plot as a framework for preaching as an alternative to the resolution plot when a more open and less structured form may be appropriate for the text and context. The revelatory plot is not in opposition to the resolution plot, it is more like a little-known relative that has been rather overshadowed. This thesis seeks to bring it centre stage. To change the analogy, both plots exist as part of a spectrum and much of what can be said of one is also true of the other, it is a matter of emphasis. The revelatory plot is a deeply embodied form of preaching with insights coming through the body and the material situation. Character and insight (also expressed as thought or theme), are to the forefront rather than action and event. It is a form with a slower pace, a reflective tone and often ends in possibilities rather than resolution.

The revelatory plot is a minority form experienced in literature and drama, but this thesis contends that it is a significant form in certain art styles and throughout this thesis art is used as a source of revelatory narrative and a model, drawing out what preachers can learn from artists. The originality of this thesis lies in the synthesis of the revelatory plot, art and preaching to produce a new homiletic model. A revelatory plot framework gives preachers a preaching style that engages congregants as whole people, is participatory and invitational by its open nature and where relevance is woven throughout.

This thesis is primarily homiletical, which is defined here as the theoretical understandings that inform preaching. It draws on theology, philosophy, art and literature to the extent that they are relevant to the subject. Preaching is defined as a

communal event that engages with both text and congregation in an encounter with God as revealed in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter one is an analysis of the characteristics of both resolution and revelatory plots, tracing the presence of both plot forms in the Bible and detailing the issues that arise. This is followed by a selective review of the homiletical literature in chapter two, tracking the influence of the resolution plot and indications of revelatory plot characteristics, particularly embodiment. This chapter ends by exploring the theology of embodiment, concerning the status of the body and the material world in Christian thinking.

Chapter three discusses whether certain forms of representational biblical art can act as a source and model for the revelatory plot. The chapter begins by examining the premise that art can narrate and pursues the debates surrounding this issue. This leads to detailing the characteristics of monoscenic, synoptic and simultaneous art and how they display many of the characteristics of the revelatory plot. Chapter three ends with a consideration of the doctrine of the image of God and what may constitute that image. This doctrine forms the basis for preachers being able to learn from a wide range of artists, including those who do not identify as believers. This chapter is a synthesis of art, theology and preaching.

Chapter four is where a sermon form based on the revelatory plot is developed; it is a form that has three processes. The first process is creating a living text, which turns the narrative world of the text into sensed particulars, turning ‘mere words’ into flesh and blood characters in specific situations. This is crucial to creating an incarnational style. The second process is locating an insight through a sensed particular that is a key to understanding the text and has the potential for a wider understanding. The final process is crafting the sermon in a way that lays bare (shows) the situation and displays a slice of narrative life that will deliver the insight. The emphasis is on an incarnational style with insights embodied in people and the material world. Revelatory narratives do not have tight endings and the subject of ending the sermon is addressed through the use of epilogues. This chapter concludes with an exploration of a theology of the incarnation and its relevance for preaching.

Chapter five investigates the role of language in delivering this embodied and open form of preaching. Critical realism is identified as the philosophy underpinning this approach and the consequences of this in terms of reference to reality. This chapter probes the different ways in which language may relate to the material world and also explores stylistic issues that may maximize the way language carries a sense

of the real. The use of tenses, framing, exemplification and Roland Barthes' 'reality effect' are considered alongside the language of the senses, metaphor and lyrical language. The chapter also addresses how different styles of language can be used within the same sermon, investigating the use of prologues and twice-told narratives.

Questions concerning textual and visual hermeneutics are the subject of chapter six where a brief overview of the relationship between interpretation and reality in hermeneutics is given. A cooperative hermeneutic is posited where author text and reader work together to create an arena where meaning is progressed. Hermeneutic virtues are considered and the impact of language in the world in terms of what words do and the consequences of hermeneutics for preaching.

Chapter seven is a response to questions concerning how people come to know through textual and visual narratives. This chapter draws on the work of Michael Polanyi and his concept of personal knowledge and how it relates to knowing through narratives. Various ways of knowing are considered and how these relate to preaching. Understanding and recognition are put forward as appropriate aims for coming to know, and the apparent contradiction between the specific nature of the revelatory plot and the need to generalise knowledge is investigated. The conflict between traditional epistemic virtues and narrative epistemic virtues is explored and the role of emotion in knowing. This chapter ends with outlining a doctrine of revelation as an aspect of knowing.

The final chapter explores the role of imagination in this style of preaching and how it is involved at all stages. The difference between imagination and fantasy is examined and the issue of the freedom of the imagination is discussed. This chapter investigates biblical attitudes to imagination and Christian historical perspectives as part of recognizing the barriers that may exist to using the imagination in a preaching context. Sacramental imagination and imagination's role in art is considered along with different taxonomies of imagination and the place of imagination in Christian theology.

Preface to Part One: The Argument

This preface traces the outlines of the argument in the first half of this thesis. The first four chapters make the case for the revelatory plot as an option for narrative preaching. I contend that the resolution plot has tended to be the default structure for narrative preaching or a significant influence, particularly when writers are discussing plotting sermons. Despite this, there are intimations of another type of plot, and I identify some of the characteristics of the revelatory plot in homiletical literature, demonstrating that these already have some purchase in the thinking around this area. However, these intimations have not been developed in any systematic way or given a framework such as the revelatory plot. I do not argue for the revelatory plot as a replacement for the resolution plot in narrative preaching, but rather as an option when the resolution plot is not suitable for the text or context. I demonstrate the presence of both plots within the Bible and make the case for an embodied and incarnational style based on the work of Charles Rice and David Day. This I follow with a theology of embodiment, advocating a theology that affirms the body and the material world.

The argument for a revelatory approach is followed by an analysis of how monoscenic, synoptic and simultaneous art narrate. I maintain that these art forms have enough of the characteristics of the revelatory plot to qualify as a source and model for preachers. I make the case for art as a complex form of narration that is more than telling a story; art is a combination of instruction, contemplation, and interpretation. All these are appropriate functions of art for preachers to draw on. Although there are challenges to some art form’s ability to narrate, I contend that these are flawed as they tend to use the principles of photography to judge art. They also use a modern, western understanding of time rather than allowing art to narrate on its own terms. I put the case for art as a way of showing a narrative that is embodied, invitational and relevant. It is a participatory form as the viewer engages with both the art and the text. One major objection to this argument from art is that not all artists are Christians and on what basis can preachers learn from non-Christian artists? In response to this I discuss ways of understanding the image of God in humankind and whether enough of the image remains after the Fall to enable preachers to learn of God from others.

In chapter four I put forward the attributes of character, insight, and laying bare the realities of a narrative as key features of the revelatory plot. I argue that

these three characteristics give the basis for developing a sermon that is immersed in Scripture, scholarship, and incarnational theology. I contend that laying bare the realities of a biblical narrative and presenting only what the characters could know brings the story to a human level and allows biblical people to speak across the generations. This way of developing sermons conserves insights in their embodied form and results in an incarnational preaching style where insights are embodied in people, things that can be sensed and situations, rather than being presented abstractly. This style is rooted in incarnational theology that gives the things of this world spiritual significance, drawing on Christ's incarnation.

Chapter One
Resolution and Revelatory Plots

This chapter aims to consider the potential of the revelatory plot as a framework for narrative preaching. It seeks to fulfil this objective by considering the revelatory plot in contrast to the resolution plot, analysing and classifying their characteristics and sources. To this end I investigate differing understandings of plots in order to introduce a broad understanding of the roles that plots can play in preaching. In accordance with the aim I assess the two plot styles, their strengths and weakness and their possibilities for preaching. As part of that evaluation I trace their origins in literature and their presence in the Bible. The overall objective of this chapter is to present the revelatory plot as an alternative for narrative preaching, particularly for narrative texts, where the resolution plot may not be the most apposite form.

1.1 Definition of terms and the role of the plot

The term 'plot' is very broad, Norman Freidman identifies fourteen types of plots classified under three headings: fortune/action, character, and thought.[1] Plot is what provides the architecture of a narrative. In this thesis the word 'plot' is used to denote the underlying structure of the narrative, without pre-judging what form that plot may take. Aristotle defined plot in terms of a narrative with a beginning, middle and end.[2] This is the classical shape of the resolution plot that forms an arc, starting with a conflict, problem or ambiguity, rising to a climax then dropping towards a resolution. The emphasis is on action and event. The term 'resolution plot' is used in this thesis in this classical way.

There are plots, which I include under the broad term 'revelatory', that favour character and insight and do not resolve strongly, giving a more open form. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg describe character, commentary, motivation and description as the soul of a narrative rather than plot, which they understand in resolution terms.[3] In this thesis I use the term 'revelatory' in an inclusive fashion to cover plots that have a low-resolution structure, where the emphasis is on character

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[1] Norman Friedman, *Form and Meaning in Fiction*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975), pp. 79–91.

[2] Aristotle, *Poetics,* trans. by S. H. Butcher (350 BCE) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1974/1974-h/1974-h.htm#link2H_4_0009> [accessed 9 February 2021], VII. Gutenberg ebook.

[3] Robert Scholes, James Phelan and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, 40th Anniversary rev. edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 239.

and insight rather than action and event, and where the main question does not concern what will happen next. This would include some of Friedman's plots of character and thought. The term 'revelatory' is not used in a narrow sense, as defined by Friedman, where the movement of the plot is from ignorance to knowledge, although that is included under revelatory plots.[4] Meir Sternberg's plots of discovery I also include under revelatory plots.[5] Ansen Dibell describes a range of plots that are not driven by resolution and cause and effect, including the mosaic plot, which is impressionistic, and a slice of life plot.[6] Both of these are included under the term 'revelatory' in this thesis.

The terms 'revelatory style' and 'revelatory preaching' are used throughout this thesis as shortened forms of 'revelatory plot style' and 'revelatory plot style preaching'. This shorthand is not a judgement on other styles of preaching as non-revelatory in a theological sense. Where possible I have restricted the term 'story' to the series of events, and 'narrative' for the way a story is rendered or told. The victory over Sisera is a series of events (story) presented in two narrative forms, prose and poetry (Judges 4 and 5). However, a strict delineation between the terms story and narrative is not always possible.

Plots, in all their forms, fulfil various roles, Peter Brooks describes the experience of plot in terms of desire that carries the reader forward and the narrative element that aids the search for meaning.[7] M. H. Abrams highlights the role of plot in achieving 'emotional and artistic effects'.[8] For E. M. Forster the presence of causal links was crucial.[9] However, narrative is more than just events organized by cause and effect, as R. S. Crane pointed out, any plot is a synthesis of action, character and thought.[10] Plot style is determined by the element that dominates.

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[4] Friedman, *Form and Meaning in Fiction*, pp. 86–91.
[5] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp.176–78.
[6] Ansen Dibell, *Plot* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1988), pp. 144–61.
[7] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, rev. edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 37.
[8] M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6th edn (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1993), p. 159.
[9] E. M. Forster, 'Story and Plot', in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*, ed. by Brian Richardson (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2002), pp. 71–72 (p. 71).
[10] R. S. Crane, 'The Concept of Plot and the Plot of Tom Jones', in *Narrative Dynamics,* ed. by Richardson, pp. 94–101 (p. 97).

1.2 Characteristics of the resolution plot

The resolution plot, as a structure for narrative preaching, has been part of homiletics at least since the publication of Eugene Lowry's *Homiletical Plot* in 1980.[11] This form of narrative preaching has brought with it many advantages: it takes people back to biblical narrative, which is a major genre of the Bible, and releases creativity for many preachers. The resolution plot has also given preachers a clear structure for addressing and resolving issues, and its move towards a denouement means that sermons have a strong finish rather than petering out. Lowry's insistence on exploring the complexity of an issue pre-empts simplistic solutions and the resolution plot's sense of closure can give a congregation an appropriate sense of assurance. Most of what is said about the revelatory plot could also be said of the resolution plot to some degree. Revelatory plots are not completely without resolution and resolution plots do not ignore character and insight. These plot styles are not opposites, they are at different points along a spectrum. The resolution plot is the form that most people are familiar with. It was articulated by Aristotle who saw action and event as taking the lead role with character and thought in second and third place, though character is revealed in action.[12] The nomenclature and stages of the resolution plot vary but there is a recognisable shape moving from problem/conflict/ambiguity through complication to climax and resolution.

There is a strong sense of movement in the resolution plot towards a final denouement. The whole forward rhythm is driven by a need to resolve the initial problem, ambiguity or conflict; this supplies the tension and pace giving the narrative its 'what happens next' pressure. Cause and effect are emphasized in resolution plots and there is an emphasis on time, often linear, for even with flashbacks and other time devices the momentum is still forwards towards resolution. Despite this, resolution plots can exhibit complexity.

The teleogenic nature of the resolution plot means that the end determines the beginning and the middle. Robert Belknap notes that it is often the end, and the movement towards it, that guides the reader concerning meaning. Values and beliefs (of the author or society) are manifest not only in the author's selection of material

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[11] Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form,* exp. edn (London: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

[12] Aristotle, *Poetics,* VI.

but in how the author chooses to resolve the central issue.[13] The 1945 film *Brief Encounter* would probably have ended differently if written fifty years later.[14]

Resolution plots tend to have a sense of closure and completeness. Walter Crouch talks of a sense of ‘quiescence’ created by closure and fulfilling the expectations the narrative has set up.[15] A particularly clear instance of this is Antony Trollope’s ending of *The Warden*, ‘Our tale is now done and it only remains to us to collect the scattered threads of our little story and to tie them into a seemly knot.’[16] Sometimes an epilogue is added to tie up all the ends and inform readers of what happens to the characters after the story has ended, as in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*.[17] Henry James ridiculed these types of resolved happy endings as being like a prize-giving where ‘pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions’ are awarded.[18] Complete closure does not have to take place with a resolution plot and often doesn’t. Umberto Eco cast doubt on whether any plot is entirely closed, openness is ‘inescapable’, it is integral to narrative in a number of ways: in structure, language, and interpretation.[19] Crouch agrees, narratives are not final, they generate other narratives. Crouch also recognizes a sense of closure other than resolution; a narrative may close in a way that leaves the reader with work to be done, with issues still to be thought through.[20]

1.3 Sources for the resolution plot

Sources for the resolution plot are many as it is the majority form. Many popular novels, and dramas use the resolution plot. Its structure can be seen most clearly in the detective novel where there is a murder, the clues mount until a key clue emerges and the plot resolves with the arrest of the murderer. The same structure can be found in thrillers and romantic comedies. Comic books are another source of the resolution

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[13] Robert L. Belknap, *Plots* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 130–34.
[14] *Brief Encounter*, dir. by. David Lean (Eagle-Lion distributers, 1945).
[15] Walter B. Crouch *Death and Closure in Biblical Narrative*, Studies in Biblical Literature 7 (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 22–25.
[16] Antony Trollope, *The Warden* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1984) <https://archive.org/details/wardentrol00trol/mode/2up> [accessed 9 February 2021], p. 198. Internet Archive ebook.
[17] George Eliot, *Middlemarch,* ed. by David Carroll (London: Oxford World Classics, 1998) <https://archive.org/details/middlemarchoxfor00geor/mode/2up> [accessed 9 February 2021], pp. 779–785. Internet Archive ebook.
[18] Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', *Longman's Magazine,* September 1884 <http://virgil.org/dswo/courses/novel/james-fiction.pdf> [accessed 9 February 2021], p. 3.
[19] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 4–5, 24, 195.
[20] Crouch, *Death and Closure,* pp. 24–26.

plot. Classical comic book structure visually leads the reader through the plot following a linear, temporal order to a resolution. Many traditional tales have a resolution shape, beginning with a problem: Red Riding Hood is threatened by a wolf, the prince is in frog form and the princess needs rescuing. The obstacles mount until a climax is reached then the wolf is defeated, the frog is returned to a prince and the princess is rescued.

Narrative art is also a source of resolution narration, but there are different types of narrative art. Unfortunately, as Gyöngyvér Horváth points out, there is no generally accepted taxonomy and although precise categories of visual narratives are desirable, it is impossible as art does not have the precision of scientific concepts and categories.[21] In order to classify art forms, the terms 'sequential' and 'continuous' are used in this thesis for artworks that narrate in a resolution style. Sequential art is a story told across a series of paintings or frames in temporal sequence; Hogarth's *Rakes Progress* is an example of sequential art.[22] Continuous art is a story told in broadly chronological sequence without separate or distinct frames. The *Bayeux Tapestry* is an example of continuous art.[23]

1.4 Issues arising from the resolution plot

Despite its advantages, the resolution plot can be rigid; Hugh Kenner describes the resolution plot as 'a broom that sweeps everything in the same direction'.[24] Lowry confirmed this movement when he talks of plots, 'always moving thought forward, beat after beat'.[25] The directive nature of the resolution plot can have both theological and pastoral consequences. Is the hearer carried relentlessly forward? Does it leave room for a range of responses?

Another issue is the degree to which the resolution plot reflects life. Stephen Crites' *Narrative Quality of Experience* was influential in highlighting the narrative quality of life, he states, 'The formal quality of experience through time is inherently

[21] Gyöngyvér Horváth, 'A Passion for Order: Classifications for Narrative Imagery in Art History and Beyond', *Visual Past,* 3.1 (2016), 247–78 <http://www.visualpast.de/ archive/pdf/vp2016_0247.pdf> [accessed 9 February 2021] (pp. 247–48, 261).

[22] William Hogarth, *The Rakes Progress I, III, VIII*, 1734, oil on canvas, 62.2 × 75, 62.5 × 75.2, 62.5 × 75.2 cm, Sir John Sloane's Museum, London <https://www.soane.org/collections/highlights/picture-room> [accessed 9 February 2021].

[23] *The Bayeux Tapestry*, 1077, embroidered linen, *c.*70m × 50 cm, Bayeux Museum, Bayeux <https://www.bayeuxmuseum.com/en/the-bayeux-tapestry/> [accessed 9 February 2021].

[24] Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study,* new edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) <https://archive.org/details/samuelbeckettcri0000kenn_t5y2/page/n5/mode/2upp> [accessed 19 February 2021], p. 67.

[25] Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Beat: Why All Sermons are Narrative* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), p. 75.

narrative.'[26] Since then many theologians and homileticians have maintained that narrative preaching chimes with the way life is perceived. Walter J. Ong declares that 'Narrative is the primal way in which the human lifeworld is organized verbally and intellectually.'[27] David Buttrick concurs, 'Narrative is built into the nature of human beings.'[28] Life, however, is not always perceived as a narrative. There have been objections to this emphasis on the narrative quality of life; Galen Strawson argues that for many people life is episodic.[29] Fred Craddock acknowledges that lives are not plotted like a novel and daily life does not have a clear movement towards resolution.[30] Plotting is artificial and crafted by a careful selection of material, whereas in life incidents happen within a plethora of detail. Cause and effect can be difficult to discern and there is no perceived pull towards a resolution. Richard Lischer admits, 'A story is a plot whose episodes and complications are directed towards a conclusion, usually resolution […] Such a shape does not always reflect the way things are.'[31]

There is truth in both views. Some people are aware of the on-going nature of their lives and understand it in narrative terms, others may experience life in a more fragmentary fashion. Post-Modernism, with its rejection of metanarratives may have exacerbated this feeling of fragmentation and even those who perceive life as a narrative do not necessarily experience it as a resolution plot. Marina Mackay notes that some writers at the beginning of the twentieth century recognized this and saw the traditional resolution plot as a 'falsification of ordinary, uneventful experience'. It is a form that confined writers to tidy endings.[32] This group of writers, labelled 'Modernist', thought that many of our days read more like Katherine Mansfield's *The Wind Blows* where Matilda is woken by the wind, views what is happening from

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[26] Stephen, Crites, 'The Narrative Quality of Experience', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39.3 (1971), 291–311 <www.jstor.org/stable/1461066> [accessed 9 February 2021] (p. 291).
[27] Walter J. Ong, 'Maranatha: Death and Life in the Text of the Book', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 45.4 (1977), 419–449 <www.jstor.org/stable/1463750> [accessed 9 February 2021] (p. 429).
[28] David Buttrick, 'Story and Symbol the Stuff of Preaching', in *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching?: Essays in Honour of Eugene L. Lowry*, ed. by Mike Graves and David J. Schlafer (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), pp. 99–113 (p. 100).
[29] Galen Strawson, 'Against Narrativity', *Ratio*, 17.4 (2004), 428–452 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9329.2004.00264.x> (p. 430).
[30] Fred B. Craddock, 'Story, Narrative and Metanarrative', in *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching* ed. by Graves and Schlafer, pp. 87–98 (p. 89).
[31] Richard Lischer, 'The Limits of Story', *Interpretation,* 38.1 (1984), 26–38 <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F002096438403800104> (p. 30).
[32] Mackay, Marina, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 87.

the window, has a music lesson and takes a walk.[33] The Modernist writers were a group of writers who broke with traditional forms and structures, particularly the resolution plot, and their works are often labelled ‘open-ended.’ They are one of the chief sources for the revelatory plot. Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, James Agee and James Joyce are just a few of the writers who belong to this group. Many of our days are like a revelatory plot where the emphasis is not on action and solving a central problem or conflict; and our days seldom have neat closure. These smaller episodes are, however, experienced under a metanarrative of our lives that, in retrospect, may conform to a resolution plot.

If plot equals resolution plot for many preachers, working in a different plot form will involve a significant change in thinking. Sometimes ending with possibilities — where that is appropriate — rather than a resolution, may mean a sermon reflects the way life is experienced for many people. The more open form may be able to handle the complexity of life. Alison Wilkinson comments, ‘faith is lived knee-deep in the mess of this world, when we don’t see a happy ending, with everything resolved.’[34]

1.5 Characteristics of the revelatory plot

As the revelatory plot is the subject of this thesis and less well-known than the resolution plot, it is explored in detail here. The characteristics are largely drawn from Modernist literature and these works are used in this section to illustrate different elements of the revelatory plot. No single work exhibits all the features, but across the movement certain characteristics emerge. I have separated them for clarity but in reality they are intertwined. Unlike the resolution plot, revelatory plots do not have an easily recognized shape, they are a series of emphases rather than a distinct structure. The key features are: an emphasis on character and insight, the latter being embodied in something specific and earthed so that the universal is known in and through the material and particular; displaying a slice of life or state of affairs in a presentational or showing style; reduced closure and more ambiguity needing more participation; reduced suspense and pace allowing for more reflection; complex

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[33] Katherine Mansfield, *The Wind Blows* <http://www.katherinemansfieldsociety.org/assets/KM-Stories/THE-WIND-BLOWS1915.pdf> [accessed 9 February 2021].

[34] Alison Wilkinson, ‘Judges 19:16–30’, in *Wrestling with the Word: Preaching Tricky Texts*. ed. by Kate Bruce and Jamie Harrison (London: SPCK, 2016), pp. 71–74 (pp. 73).

cause and effect and non-linear movement; a creative use of time and language; a scenic or painting-like quality; intertextuality and an emphasis on atmosphere.

The characteristics of the revelatory approach result in a form of preaching that is embodied, invitational and relevant. It is deeply embodied through its presentation of character, embodied insights and laying bare of a slice of life, which in turn contributes to relevance as it provides the context for identification and recognition, resonating with the congregation. Reflection, reduced tension and pace, non-linear movement, complex cause and effect, and more open endings give this approach its invitational nature.

Revelatory plots foreground character, which is often revealed in actions and details. James Agee captures a relationship in the way a husband remakes the bed to keep the warmth in, inviting his wife to rest.[35] There can be a moving in and out of characters and a presentation of what they sense, feel and think. It is often a subjective point of view that is given rather than an omniscient narrator. In Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* the audience sees the town through different citizen's eyes.[36] Characters are not just agents who fulfil roles but people whose character is slowly revealed. In Albert Camus' *Outsider* there is action; there is a death and a trial, but they serve to disclose the character of the protagonist, Muersault, who is revealed as emotionally cold and alienated from people and society.[37] Paying attention to characters as fully embodied people facilitates relevance that comes through recognition and identification.

Revelatory writing highlights insight, which may take the form of a theme presented in different situations and may be implicit rather than stated. Insight can be a slow process or come in sudden moments. Joyce referred to these moments as 'epiphanies' that often came through ordinary things, Wordsworth called them 'spots of time'.[38] Abrams defines an epiphany as a 'sudden flare' of an ordinary object into revelation.[39] James Joyce's short story, *A Little Cloud* describes one such moment when a sound awakens Little Chandler to his trapped situation, 'The wailing of the child pierced the drum of his ear. It was useless, useless! He was a prisoner.'[40] In

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[35] James Agee, *A Death in the Family* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), p. 29.
[36] Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).
[37] Albert Camus, *The Outsider,* trans. by Stuart Gilbert (London: Penguin Classics, 1961).
[38] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805) <https://romantic-circles.org/editions/poets/texts/preludeXII.html> [accessed 9 February 2021], XII. 1.
[39] Abrams, *A Glossary,* p. 57.
[40] James Joyce, *The Dubliners* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1993) <https://archive.org/details/dublinersurb00joyc> [22 February 2021], pp. 79–80.

revelatory works there is a detailing of the particularities of life, and insights come through the material situation and the body. This is what gives the revelatory plot its embodied nature. The universal is understood in and through the concrete and particular rather than making abstract and general statements, this makes relevance easier to perceive. Dwelling on the specific and concrete acts as a microcosm of the wider world. A. L. Bader notes how Modernist writers often focus on a limited time, a specific action or place, which serves a broader understanding.[41] James Joyce's works revolve around Dublin, but they have a universal quality.

Revelatory plots are about displaying or showing a state of affairs, a slice of life, rather than action and events. Thorton Wilder's play *Our Town* is about an ordinary town where nothing much happens, 'Nobody very remarkable ever came out of it, s'far as we know.'[42] The play is an exploration of how time on earth is taken for granted by the people of the town. Dibell highlights the way slice of life narratives reveal a situation through its effect on people; one family's situation may throw light on a wider issue and small occurrences 'demonstrate a larger social reality'.[43] James Agee's *A Death in the Family* details a family's reaction to death rather than focussing on the accident that causes the death.[44] Seymour Chatman describes the revelatory plot as not posing and answering questions concerning what will happen next, not resolving anything and having little change in external circumstances. Any development is expressed in displaying and revealing a state of affairs and the writer is concerned with 'the infinite detailing' of human existence.[45] This helps with relevance that comes through recognising a situation that may chime with the listener in some way. This type of narration puts a frame around an aspect of life that people tend to miss because it is familiar and occurs within a welter of detail; it provides a narrative close-up that can act as a defamiliarization technique. Insights coming through the material world and the mundane have a pastoral aspect for it reflects most believers' experience, which is not generally studded with supernatural interventions. Holding up a slice of life and laying bare a situation in all its physicality affirms the way most Christians live their faith.

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[41] A. L., Bader, 'The Structure of the Modern Short Story', in *Critical Approaches to Fiction,* ed. by Shiv K. Kumar and Keith McKean (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2014), pp. 49–57 (pp. 52–3).
[42] Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*, I, p.7.
[43] Dibell, *Plot*, pp.148-9
[44] Agee, *A Death in the Family*.
[45] Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse*: *Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 48.

There is more showing than telling and more presenting than explaining in revelatory narratives**.** This is sometimes achieved through dialogue; at other times it is seeing what the world looks like from a character's point of view. The showing is often deeply connected to the senses, presenting the nature of something — the blackness of black, the snowiness of snow. Wallace Stevens entitled one of his poems 'Not ideas about the thing but the thing itself', which sums up this presentation of reality.[46]

Ambiguity and a weakened sense of closure is characteristic of revelatory plots. Meaning may be communicated indirectly, there may be gaps and a narrative may end with a series of possibilities rather than a resolution, all the ends may not be neatly tied. This means the reader/hearer is not passive, they participate in filling gaps and working out possibilities. A slice of life may be laid bare, but conclusions may not always be drawn in an obvious manner, inviting the congregation to complete the sermon with their own responses. This gives the revelatory plot its invitational nature. There may also be a sense that the story is ongoing in some way. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* finding Kurtz does not solve anything but the reader is forced to engage with the darkness of colonialism.[47] Both ambiguity and less closure invite more participation.

In revelatory works, tension tends to be created by emotion and other factors rather than the need to resolve a conflict. This results in diminished suspense concerning what will happen next. The move from resolution to revelation abrogates the end pressure and facilitates a more reflective style. Pace is slowed but there is movement and direction, though it is not relentlessly forward. Laying bare a scene or an aspect of a narrative can act as a brake on the narrative. David Levin talks of 'snaring and retarding' in Modernist literature.[48] This gives time for reflection on characters and their situation and supports relevance through recognition and identification.

There is cause and effect in revelatory writing, but it may be psychological or by juxtaposition, association or contrast rather than the domino effect of temporal and direct causation. Time is often treated creatively and the movement is not

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[46] Wallace Stevens, 'Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself', in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens,* 2nd edn (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), p 565.
[47] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Dover, 1990) <https://archive.org/details/heartofdarkness000conr> [accessed 22 February 2021].
[48] David Michael Levin, 'The Novelhood of the Novel: The Limits of Representation and the Modernist Discovery of Presence', *Chicago Review*, 28.4 (1977), 87–108 <www.jstor.org/stable/25303624> [accessed 9 February 2021] (p. 97).

necessarily linear. The standard sense of the development of events is weakened or disrupted by reflections and memories. With Marcel Proust, the past is sensed as vibrantly as the present and becomes a form of 're-lived present'.[49] There is a heightened reflective mood, with the reader held in a moment or series of moments. Both features are apparent in the opening of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past.* The reader is held in the moment when the sleeper awakes experiencing disorientation, and memories of another place surface. 'The wall would slide away in another direction; I was in my room in Mme de Saint-Loup's house in the country.'[50] Time may slow or appear to stand still in places in some revelatory works; Wesley Kort describes this type of literature as a guided tour around an essentially static situation.[51] Time may also be presented in a non-linear fashion as in *Mrs Dalloway*, which takes place over one day but moves in and out of different times.[52]

Impressionistic, creative and figurative language can be a characteristic of narratives written in this style. Displaying a situation is not necessarily achieved by Dickens-style detailed description, it is often achieved by a lighter touch, just a few verbal brush strokes. D.H. Lawrence uses this technique in *The Virgin and the Gipsy* where granny's character is indicated in just a few words, 'Her old mouth shut like a trap.'[53] Figurative and symbolic language is also characteristic, with key images, phrases and symbols being repeated. The black hat in Kathrine Mansfield's *The Garden Party* is an instance of this.[54]

Revelatory texts often have a spatial and scenic quality. Modernist literature, was described by Joseph Frank as 'spatial', giving it a pictorial quality.[55] Such literature is often likened to impressionist painting. One way in which revelatory

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[49] Beverley Gross, 'Narrative Time and the Open-Ended Novel', *Criticism*, 8.4 (1966), 362–376 <www.jstor.org/stable/23094146> [accessed 9 February 2021] (pp. 363, 366–67, 369).

[50] Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: Swann's Way,* trans. by C. K. Scott-Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. by D. J. Enright (New York: The Modern Library, 1992) <https://uberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Proust-1.pdf> [accessed 9 February 2021], pp. 5–6.

[51] Wesley Kort, *Modern Fiction and Human Time: A Study in Narrative and Belief* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1985), p. 8.

[52] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Vintage Books, 2004) <https://archive.org/details/mrsdalloway0000wool_g6v1/page/n5/mode/2up> [accessed 22 February 2021]. Internet Archive ebook.

[53] D. H. Lawrence, *The Virgin and the Gypsy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) <https://archive.org/details/virgingipsy00lawr_0/> [accessed 9 February 2021], p. 117. Internet Archive ebook.

[54] Katherine Mansfield, *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (New York: Modern Library, 1931), <https://archive.org/details/gardenpartyothermansrich/page/n3/mode/2up> [accessed 9 February 2021], pp. 59-82. Internet Archive ebook.

[55] Joseph Frank, 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Two Parts', *The Sewanee Review*, 53.2 (1945), 221–240 <www.jstor.org/stable/27537575> [accessed 9 February 2021] (p. 225).

narrative is spatial is the presentation of key scenes; some may be presented in detail while other parts of the story may be told in a more summary fashion. A different spatial aspect is when a sensation triggers a memory and the narrative moves out of the temporal order and into spatial imagery. The most famous example is Proust's 'Madeleine' moment, where the taste of a Madeleine dipped in tea triggers memories that expand and appear three dimensional.[56]

Revelatory plots can be deeply intertextual; James Joyce's *Ulysses* is structured to reflect Homer's *Odyssey* and D. H. Lawrence's *The Virgin and the Gypsy* draws on biblical material in the flood that engulfs Yvette's home.[57] Atmosphere and tone are a feature of revelatory works. Proust captures mood and atmosphere, 'painting' memories like an artist. 'The rooms at Combray, thickly powdered with the motes of an atmosphere granular, pollinated, edible and devout.'[58]

In summary, the cumulative effect of this broad range of characteristics is to create an approach that is embodied, relevant and invitational. It is embodied by its focus on people and their situation and the earthing of insights in the physical world. It is relevant in the way it relates to how ordinary life is lived, by showing a slice of life and its slow reflective pace that gives the congregation time to identify with characters and recognize situations that may have something to say to their own. It is invitational with its openness, ambiguity and participatory nature, drawing people into an imaginative engagement with the text.

1.6 Sources for the revelatory plot

Sources for the revelatory plot are varied but this type of plot can be observed across the arts even though it is a minority style in most media. Many films have been made about World War II, most are action films, but some are more reflective and explore Churchill's character or one family's situation as a way of understanding the wider issues. As mentioned, Modernist literature and drama are a rich source of revelatory works. The Modernist movement is often dated from the 1890s to 1950s, although the time boundaries are permeable. No definitive form emerges from Modernist writing but there is a constellation of characteristics that emerge across the movement.

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[56] Proust, *Swann's Way*, pp. 63–65.
[57] James Joyce, *Ulysses*, read by Jim Norton (Naxos Audio Books, 2008).
Lawrence, *The Virgin and the Gipsy,* pp. 129–30.
[58] Proust, *Swann's Way*, p. 523.

Some sections of Modernist novels present a 'slice' of physical, social or psychological life, often found in short stories and drama. Some of Flannery O'Connor's short stories, such as *Revelation,* fall into this category.[59] Modern graphic novels, such as the Japanese Manga series *Baby & Me,* are now breaking with the resolution plot style and detailing daily life.[60] Artworks, particularly representational painting, are a potential source of revelatory plots if it can be demonstrated that art can narrate in this style. This is discussed in chapter three. Although traditional tales tend to have a resolution shape, they contain some characteristics of the revelatory plot in performance, making them a hybrid form. The mode of telling involves high levels of participation and repetition with very little 'what happens next' pressure; getting to the end is not the point as the end is known. Such tales are about a community experiencing a narrative together, an affirmation of certain understandings and values.

1.7 Issues arising from the revelatory plot

Revelatory works, with their impressionist feel and non-linear movement, can make heavy demands of readers and require enhanced engagement. Listeners are different to readers, for a congregation there is no re-reading to clarify understanding, any moves need to be clear and well supported. Both intertextuality and intratextuality are often expressed as echoes or allusion but these may not be apprehended by every member of the congregation. This means that the sermon should not *depend* on the intertextuality unless is it made clear in the sermon. Intertextuality can be there as an added layer for those who are aware of the texts involved. The preacher who knows the congregation can decide on the depth of intertextuality that is appropriate. Ambiguity and leaving gaps can be issues for some congregations, but they have their place, allowing for freedom of response, participation and interpretation. This is part of creating a non-coercive and invitational form.

The scenic aspect of the revelatory plot poses a question for preachers: how is a scene that is spatial communicated in an event that takes place in time? One way of communicating space is to use scenes that are built in a three-dimensional way. Small touches of description that key the senses can help build a scene. Alyce MacKenzie details ways of doing this in her book *Making a Scene in the Pulpit*.[61]

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[59] Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (Faber and Faber, 2009), pp. 488–509.
[60] Marimo Ragawa, *Baby and Me,* 18 vols (San Francisco**:** VIZ Media, 1992–1997).
[61] Alyce M. McKenzie, *Making a Scene in the Pulpit: Vivid Preaching for Visual Listeners* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

The reduced pace of the revelatory plot gives the preacher time to explore a text, the characters and the situation, whilst still preaching in a narrative form. It allows for recognition and identification to take place, but this form of relevance is not necessarily automatic. King David did not see himself in Nathan's parable (II Samuel 12:7) until Nathan said, 'You are that man.' Revelatory preaching can include guidance appropriate to the form, as detailed in chapter four. The slow pace has its own consequences, some churches have a tradition of short sermons. This may mean that single insights are covered and the text returned to on different occasions. There is a sense of completeness when all the ends are tied and this can give a congregation a sense of closure that may be missing with a revelatory sermon. However, complete closure is not always appropriate and ending with possibilities or a reflection is not the same as lack of closure. Closure is reduced not abandoned. The key issue is the nature of the text, some need closure, others invite a more open ending allowing for more freedom of response and an invitational style.

The use of creative language and a presentational style can raise issues of performance. Actors perform but preaching is not acting. The word 'performance' can have undercurrents of hypocrisy, acting a part. This view is partly based on a misunderstanding of performance in theatre. Actors seek to tell the truth about a character or situation by the way they act. It takes skill and practice to reflect the way a playwright has written a character. Each time actors perform a role they may come closer to representing a character truthfully. Christians are called to 'perform' the gospel in their lives, expressing its truth through bodily existence. Over time both preacher and congregation learn to perform the gospel with growing truthfulness and authenticity. Like actors, such authenticity comes through honing skills. The more the skills are honed, the less attention they draw to themselves.

1.8 Plot styles and the Bible

Jean Louis Ska notes that biblical stories seem to be plots of resolution but then everything slows down, and it feels as if the events are there to 'display' the presence of God or some truth about God. The encounter of David with Goliath is one instance of this type of mixed plot where the preparations and David's speech are given more time and detail than the battle (I Samuel 17). Jonah is another instance, it could be a resolution narrative about the conversion of the people of Nineveh or a

revelatory narrative concerning Jonah's inner turmoil (Jonah 1– 4).[62] Biblical plots can be resolution, revelatory, or mixed and plots can 'nest' under each other. Sometimes a group of resolution plots, such as a series of healing stories, sits under a larger revelatory plot about people coming to recognize Jesus' identity. Ultimately, all biblical narratives sit under the resolution metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption and recreation. Thomas Long highlights the eschatological nature of this master plot with its end stress.[63] However, Walter Ong observes that the future orientation of the Bible confers a lack of closure on the smaller plots in Scripture. There is a looking forward to the Messiah in the Old Testament, and an anticipation of Christ's return — with the realisation of God's Kingdom — in the New Testament. There are strongly closed narratives in the Bible, such as Esther and Job, but Ong comments that these texts have tended to evoke scholarly debate. Many Bible stories are not tightly closed and end with possibilities or questions.[64] Abraham's story concludes with promises only partly fulfilled, Jonah ends with a question, the parable of the unjust steward leaves more questions than answers, and the book of Acts ends with Paul under house arrest (Genesis 12–23; Jonah 4:9–11; Luke 16:1–13; Acts 28:30–31).

Frank Kermode comments that the short ending of Mark's gospel (Make 16: 8) is like the endings of Joyce's novels *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* and Mark's terse ending leaves the reader to make sense of it.[65] William Kurtz notes that this was a practice used in the ancient world to stimulate reader-reflection.[66] Robert Alter sees biblical narrative as less closed than mythological stories and able to handle the complexities of life.[67] It may be that reduced closure is a characteristic of life lived between Christ's first and second coming. David Buttrick's statement that every plot is, 'in a sense a confession of faith' may point to ways in which reduced closure reflects Christian belief concerning living between times.[68]

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[62] Jean Louis Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us: Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives,* Subsida Biblica 13 (Rome: Editrice Pontifico Instutio Biblico, 1990), pp. 18–19.
[63] Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), pp. 126–8.
[64] Ong, *Maranatha*, 419–449 (pp. 439–440).
[65] Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) <https://archive.org/details/genesisofsecrecy00kermrich/mode/2up> [accessed 9 February 2021], pp. 66–70. Internet Archive ebook.
[66] William S. Kurtz, 'The Open-ended Nature of Luke and Acts as Inviting Canonical Actualisation', *Neotestamentica,* 31.2 (1997), 289–308 <www.jstor.org/stable/43048325> [accessed 9 February 2021] (pp. 292–93).
[67] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. edn (New York: Basic Books, 2001), pp. 30, 37.
[68] David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 290.

The revelatory plot leads on character and insight but information concerning characters is sometimes limited in the Bible. Eric Auerbach notes how biblical characters may be drawn with restraint compared to Homeric literature and how such restraint signals a deep layering of time and experience. To use Auerbach's term, they are 'fraught with background'. The biblical narrative may show only a little of a character, but the reader becomes aware that much exists beneath the surface; these characters have a history with God and others. Much is unexpressed in the Bible, which is content with mystery in a way that Homeric epics are not.[69] The Bible is often described as having little interest in the inner lives of characters, the opposite of the revelatory plot, but Adele Berlin refutes this. The inner life of characters is conveyed in a variety of ways: through the words of the narrator or other characters, through the way a character is shown and through the character's speech, thoughts and actions.[70] We are told of Sarah's inner thoughts and feelings concerning the promise of a child (Genesis 18:12); Joseph's emotions are apparent when he meets his brothers (Genesis 42:24) and Mark tells us that Jesus felt pity (or anger) at seeing what disease could do to a person (Mark 1.40–41). Sternberg concurs, describing the inner life of biblical characters as 'underground' rather than non-existent.[71]

There are moments of insight in the Bible such as Elizabeth and Thomas acknowledging Jesus as Lord (Luke 1:43; John 20:28). Sternberg likens this type of insight to Modernist fiction, though biblical enlightenment is sometimes followed by lapses.[72] Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ only to define it in a way that Jesus rejects (Mark 8:27–33). As with revelatory narrative, insight into a biblical story or character often comes through the physical and material. Insight into Hannah's depression comes through a plate of untouched food (I Samuel 1:7); insight into David's choices comes through a piece of cloth (I Samuel 24). Insights are embodied and Auerbach comments on the earthiness of biblical stories; they are the stories of the ordinary, not just the great, and they relate the activities of daily life, not just the heroic.[73] Amos Wilder makes similar comments and he perceives Modernist authors

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[69] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) <https://archive.org/details/mimesisrepresent00auer> [accessed 9 February 2021], pp. 8–12, 15. Internet Archive ebook.

[70] Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, Bible and Literature Series, 9 (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), pp. 37–39, 61.

[71] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, p. 54.

[72] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 177–78.

[73] Auerbach, *Mimesis*, pp. 21–22.

as chiming with the earthiness and realism of biblical narrative.[74] The Bible tells of Eglon's obesity (Judges 3:17), Esther' beauty (Esther 2:7) and Ahab's sulk (I Kings 21:4).

Sternberg finds in the Bible the gaps, ambiguities and reduced suspense that are characteristic of the revelatory plot. These require work from the reader, but Sternberg maintains that the reader is not unaided, the text ultimately comes to judgement of some sort. He observes that Bible stories have reduced suspense as a reflection of divine control, although this is tempered by freewill.[75] This is exemplified at key points in Israel's history; once God has promised the Hebrew slaves a land of their own the outcome is not really in doubt, what is open is how it will be achieved (Exodus 6:8). Traditional suspense may be reduced but psychological tension can be strong, as in the case of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22).

Revelatory narrative is often impressionistic and uses creative, figurative language. Biblical narrative is replete with figurative language; people 'melt in fear' (Joshua:2:9) and the enemy chases like bees (Deuteronomy 1:44). Biblical description can be minimalist but revealing. Sternberg describes the Bible as interested in realism but not in an obtrusive way.[76] Adele Berlin admits that biblical description can be sparse, but the reader is given enough to know what type of person the character is. In art, the suggestion of something, an impression, can be more convincing than detailed representation. The same can be true of description. Much is suggested in biblical description but not portrayed in detail.[77] The Bible describes security in a simple image of sitting under your own fig tree unafraid (Micah 4:4). Craddock puts forward the argument that too much detailed description suggests unreality as we only see in part. We never see the whole of something.[78] Richard Eslinger also notes that too many adjectives can work against oral communication, over burdening the sermon.[79]

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[74] Amos N. Wilder, *Theology and Modern Literature* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1958) <https://archive.org/details/theologymodernli0000unse/page/70/mode/2up> [accessed 18 February 2021], pp. 69–70.
[75] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 209, 233–35, 267–68.
[76] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, p. 329.
[77] Berlin, *Poetics,* pp. 34–36, 136–38.
[78] Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, rev. edn (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), p. 77.
[79] Richard L. Eslinger, *Pitfalls in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 11.

Revelatory narrative is scenic and Robert Alter, in his discourse on biblical type scenes, notes that such scenes often carry the significance of a narrative.[80] Yairah Amit, Adele Berlin and Jean Louis Ska all underscore this, detailing the scenic nature of the Old Testament. Naboth is an instance of a highly scenic story, moving between palace, city and vineyard.[81] Scenic presentation is more showing than telling and the Bible often uses the showing mode.

1.9 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to present the revelatory plot as an alternative to the resolution plot, giving preachers a choice of narrative preaching styles. It fulfilled that objective by exploring the nature of both plot styles, their sources, strengths and weaknesses. Neither form of plot is issue-free, and the type of plot used to structure a sermon will depend on the text and context. As the revelatory plot is a constellation of characteristics rather than a specific shape or structure, it presents a challenge concerning how it could be developed as a sermon form, an issue addressed in chapter four. Although the revelatory plot is known from literature and drama and is present in Scripture, it has not been developed in terms of its homiletic potential, something this thesis seeks to address.

The following chapter traces the influence of the resolution plot across homiletic literature in order to understand to what degree this style of plot is the assumed plot-form in narrative preaching. Has ‘plot’ become shorthand for resolution plot? Chapter two also looks at areas where homileticians are breaking with the resolution plot and whether these constitute a basis for developing the revelatory plot as an alternative form of narrative preaching.

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[80] Robert Alter, ‘Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention’, *Critical Inquiry*, 5.2 (1978), 355–368 <www.jstor.org/stable/1343017> [accessed 9 February 2021] (p. 359).

[81] Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible,* trans. by Yael Lotan (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 49–58. Berlin, *Poetics,* pp. 46, 64. Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, pp. 33–37.

Chapter Two
Resolution and Revelatory plots: Influence and Intimations

This chapter aims to investigate the influence of the resolution plot and whether it is a default structure for plotting in narrative preaching. It also seeks to explore whether some characteristics of the revelatory plot, particularly embodiment, are already present in the homiletical literature, and concerns around a change of plot styles for preachers. As part of these aims this chapter considers a theology of embodiment and whether the revelatory plot's embodied style correlates with scriptural attitudes to the body and the material world.

To these ends I consider embodiment in the Bible and the influence of Greek philosophy in this area. I explore different ways in which the influence of the resolution plot form may be expressed and look for intimations of another type of plot in homiletical literature. I assess if they point in a revelatory direction by tracing the presence of revelatory plot characteristics among those indications. The overall intention of this chapter is to call attention to the narrow use of the word 'plot', which sometimes assumes the resolution plot and to examine the key features of the revelatory plot already present in the homiletical literature, in particular embodiment. As part of this investigation, there is a selective review of scholarly writing in this area. The works concerned were largely published after 1980, a pivotal date as it is the year of publication of Lowry's *The Homiletical Plot*, which gave explicit expression to the resolution plot as a structure for preaching.[1]

2.1 Eugene Lowry and the homiletical plot

In his book *The Homiletical Plot*, Lowry introduced preachers to the resolution plot in the form of the 'Lowry loop', that shares the same shape as the literary resolution plot if not identical terminology.[2] The loop originally had five stages that Lowry later simplified to four, with the possibility of the gospel emerging at several points. The plot moves from conflict/problem or ambiguity through complication to the sudden shift or reversal and then to the unfolding, also termed the denouement or resolution.[3] For Lowry, the task of the sermon is to resolve the main conflict, ambiguity or problem of the text but he allows for the full force of it to be felt at the complication

[1] Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, p. 12.
[2] Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, p. 26.
[3] Eugene L. Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), pp. 81–89.

stage where the situation is explored in depth. There is no quick movement from problem to gospel resolution, the complexities of the situation are faced. Lowry's structure has closure and in *Doing Time in the Pulpit,* he states that people need a large amount of closure and do not rest until they get it.[4] His focus is on events and movement with a stress on the temporal rather than the spatial. Nevertheless, Lowry acknowledges that narrative preaching in the resolution shape takes various forms, this he details in *How to Preach a Parable,* but the overall shape of all these variations is the resolution arc.[5] Since Lowry's ground-breaking book many preachers and writers have followed in assuming the resolution plot to varying degrees.

2.2 Degrees of influence

The degree of influence concerning the resolution plot varies. Craddock's 1985 book *Preaching* does not explicitly use the resolution structure, he talks of anticipation, tension, expectancy and 'climatic arrangement'.[6] Lowry broadly interpreted Craddock as leading towards resolution, but he does not rigidly impose his own resolution structure on Craddock's preaching, recognising his style as episodic.[7] Craddock does refer to the resolution plot in his later writing. In *Story, Narrative and Metanarrative* he reiterates much of Lowry's plot form and defines narrative using Lowry's terms of tension, unfolding and resolution.[8]

Jana Childers is strongly influenced by the resolution plot; she uses the language and structure of the resolution plot and refers to Lowry as the father of the narrative sermon. She describes the form as moving the congregation from A to B using suspense and she emphasizes action that is generated by conflict, with a movement from conflict to resolution. Despite this Childers is open to other forms and her appreciation of the resolution plot has not narrowed her view of how sermons are structured. She sees preaching in terms of theatre, and this helpful analogy gives a sermon a more spatial aspect than Lowry.[9] In *Playing with Fire,*

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[4]Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, pp. 31–2. Eugene, L. Lowry, *Doing Time in the Pulpit: The Relationship Between Narrative and Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), pp. 56–58.
[5] Eugene L. Lowry, *How to Preach a Parable: Designs for Narrative Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), pp. 38–49.
[6] Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), pp. 165–67.
[7] Lowry, *The Homiletical Beat*, pp. 38–39.
[8] Fred B. Craddock, 'Story, Narrative and Metanarrative', in '*What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching?*, ed. by Graves and Schlafer, pp. 87–98 (pp. 88–89).
[9] Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 43–44, 126–32.

David Schlafer assumes the resolution plot when he discusses preaching as drama and the term 'plot' appears to be shorthand for resolution plot. Although his explicit use of resolution language is low, when Schlafer does use it, he is insistent. Plot for Schlafer is 'conflict moving through suspense towards resolution' and 'The sequence of ideas, images, and stories constituting a sermon *must* [my italics] be presented in the form of a plot.'[10]

Sidney Greidanus, when he discusses plot, assumes the resolution structure in *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*.[11] In his article 'Detecting Plot Lines' he begins by stating that a person discovers the plot line by asking what the conflict is and how it is resolved. Greidanus goes on to use resolution language, structure and movement throughout. However, Greidanus fully acknowledges the complexity of Old Testament narratives and he justifiably refuses to fit them into a simple resolution arc; he acknowledges subplots and plots with delayed resolution.[12]

Initially, Dennis Cahill appears less overt than Greidanus in his use of resolution language, but Cahill assumes that plot equals a resolution format, particularly for sermons based on narratives. He maintains that at the beginning of any story there is an unresolved situation and a chain of events that lead to a conclusion. 'The plot is the storyline, including the twists and turns of the biblical story, plus the complications, conflicts, and ultimate resolution.' Cahill interprets narrative preaching in a more circumscribed way than Lowry, he sees Lowry's idea of a narrative sermon as too broad, barely distinguishable from inductive preaching. Cahill envisages the sermon following the plot of the biblical narrative and having the characteristics of story not just a resolution structure.[13]

In *The Web of Preaching*, Richard Eslinger looks at how homiletic methods relate and he uses the language and structure of the resolution plot in his analysis of narrative forms. He reviews Lowry's resolution format positively but he is critical of the late shift to a positive message in Lowry's model, a criticism that may be

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[10] David J. Schlafer, *Playing with Fire: Preaching Work as Kindling Art* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2004), pp. 69–70, 72.
[11] Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 203–05.
[12] Sidney Greidanus, 'Detecting Plot Lines: The Key to Preaching the Genesis Narratives', *Calvin Theological Journal,* 43 (2008), 64–77 (pp. 65-66).
[13] Dennis M. Cahill, *The Shape of Preaching: Theory and Practice in Sermon Design* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), pp. 131–139.

justified in Lowry's early model of the resolution plot but less so of Lowry's later model where the gospel emerges at various points.[14]

Thomas Troeger's use of the resolution plot is much looser and he suggests a range of imaginative variations on the Lowry loop, but these still reflect a similar movement to the resolution plot. This is to be expected as they are described as improvisations on Lowry's original structure.[15] Linda Clader in *Voicing the Vision* states that she finds Lowry's work an inspiration, particularly his use of suspense and its resolution. She is influenced by the resolution plot but shows awareness of other styles of plot. She insightfully notes that when people talk of narrative preaching, they are thinking in terms of a linear resolution plot with its classic stages. She sees the gospels as following a similar plot resolving in the Resurrection, but she is not constrained by the resolution plot, she is open to other forms.[16] In a like manner, when discussing the shape of narratives, David Day reiterates the resolution plot but only as one plot form, his plotting is broad and not restricted to a resolution shape. [17] Roger Standing, in *Finding the Plot* rehearses Lowry's plot form and uses its language and structure throughout. However, he shows an awareness of the dangers and criticisms but these are not limited to the resolution plot but relate to all narrative preaching.[18]

In his chapter in *Preaching Biblically*, Thomas Long uses the language and movement of the resolution plot. He speaks of preachers as 'creators of plots' and the need to plot sermons. The movement is from anticipation to denouement with the end-stress 'energising' the forward movement. Long appears to make the same assumption of the resolution plot in *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*. He talks of linked events leading towards a conclusion and resolving a situation when discussing texts of a narrative genre.[19] Despite this language, Long sits loosely on the resolution plot, significantly labelling formulas (such as the stages of the resolution plot) as 'literary clichés' and unhelpful.[20]

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[14] Richard L. Eslinger, *The Web of Preaching: New Options in Homiletical Method* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), pp. 33–34, 51–52, 103–150.
[15] Thomas H. Troeger, 'Improvisations on the Lowry Loop: New Forms of Preaching for a Globalized World', in *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching,* ed. by Graves and Schlafer, pp. 211–226 (pp. 214–15).
[16] Linda L. Clader, *Voicing the Vision: Imagination and Prophetic Preaching* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2003), pp. 100–03.
[17] David Day, *Embodying the Word: A Preacher's Guide* (London: SPCK, 2005), pp. 100.
[18] Roger Standing, *Finding the Plot: Preaching in Narrative Style* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012), pp. 53–55, 75, 79–91, 97-98, 120–34.
[19] Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 70–72.
[20] Thomas Long, 'Shaping Sermons by Plotting the Text's Claim Upon Us', in, *Preaching Biblically:*

John Holbert has low use of resolution plot language in most of his book *Preaching Old Testament*, but his section on plot indicates that he takes the resolution plot for granted. He emphatically asserts that a plot must be sequential and should primarily reflect action. There is a strong emphasis on a cause-effect structure that he finds reflected in biblical narratives. Despite this he is creative in his discussion of narrative preaching on Old Testament texts.[21]

In *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching,* Joel Green uses the language of resolution when discussing the aim of narrative and the genre of the gospels but he does not restrict preachers to the resolution plot, he constructively suggests that sermons can be plotted in different ways and still be faithful to the biblical narrative, an attitude that frees preachers from a strict resolution structure.[22] In *Preaching that Matters,* Stephen Farris uses the resolution format but only as one way of composing a sermon. He is discerning in the way he uses plotting; he does not use all the resolution plot stages and he allows for several attempts at resolution.[23]

There are writers who are influenced by the resolution plot to the extent that they assume 'plot' to be resolution in structure, but they develop their own model. John Wright, in *Telling God's Story,* assumes the resolution plot in his criticism of its linear, logical sequence that ends in resolution. He suggests a more radical and less linear movement in his own model of turning.[24] Rosalind Brown records Lowry's plot, describing it as a form of problem solving, which may be unfair to Lowry. She uses the form but not uncritically; Brown adjusts the resolution plot to one of ongoing dialogue between the Bible and the congregation.[25] Richard Jensen sounds a personal note in reference to the resolution plot, he admits that he used to assume that the purpose of a story was to get to the end in a linear fashion, but he notes that

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Creating Sermons in the Shape of Scripture, ed. by Don M. Wardlaw (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), pp. 84–100 (pp. 86–88).

[21] John C. Holbert, *Preaching Old Testament: Proclamation and Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), pp. 63–4.

[22] Joel B. Green, 'Reading the Gospels and Acts as Narrative', in *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching: Reuniting New Testament Interpretation and Proclamation,* ed. by Joel B. Green and Michael Pasquarello (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 37–66 (pp. 34, 44).

[23] Stephen Farris, *Preaching That Matters: The Bible and Our Lives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), p. 125–128.

[24] John W. Wright, *Telling God's Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), pp. 19, 35, 85, 87, 92.

[25] Rosalind Brown, *Can Words Express Our Wonder?: Preaching in the Church Today* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009), pp. 35–8, 62.

some stories are not about resolution. Jensen selectively uses some of the language of the resolution plot but within his own creative form of stitching stories together.[26]

Some homileticians, though they may be influenced by the resolution plot, have little explicit expression of it in their work. Barbara Brown Taylor's approach in *The Preaching Life* is narrative and imaginative but it is not dominated by the resolution plot; she appears to use a broadly inductive approach that effectively uses the language of the senses but she does not follow any tight format. Geoffrey Stevenson and Stephen Wright in *Preaching with Humanity* discuss narrative preaching and talk of allowing the congregation to 'sense the movement of the plot' but their section on sermon form does not slavishly follow any form.[27] Stephen Wright in *Alive to God's Word* refers to the 'strong case' Lowry makes for narrative preaching and acknowledges the insights gained, however, the resolution plot is not a controlling influence on his thinking and he is rightly critical of its over-use, a criticism that applies to any sermon form.[28]

Surprisingly, Bryan Chapell, an exponent of expository preaching, comments favourably on the use of the resolution plot as a way of structuring sermons based on biblical narratives, and specifically names Lowry's structure as helpful. He does, however, expresses caution concerning narrative preaching and the possible neglect of propositional truth; this is understandable, given his commitment to expository preaching. Chapell sees the movement in the sermon as a theological movement from fallen condition to redemptive purpose.[29] Paul Scott Wilson uses the term 'plot' as part of his four-page structure and talks in terms of the resolution of tension, ultimately seen in the resurrection. However, his innovative pattern from trouble to grace is a theological movement, placing the gospel in the pivotal point of the sermon. This movement may be a forward movement, as in the resolution plot, but he rightly asserts that this is the movement inherent in Scripture, from Exodus to the Promised Land, from the Crucifixion to the Resurrection.[30]

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[26] Richard A. Jensen, *Thinking in Story: Preaching in a Post-literate Age* (Lima: CSS Publishing, 1995), pp. 23–25, 110-112, 121.
[27] Geoffrey Stevenson and Stephen Wright, *Preaching with Humanity: A Practical Guide for Today's Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), pp. 72–77.
[28] Stephen I. Wright *Alive to God's Word: A Practical Theology of Preaching for the Whole Church* (London: SCM Press, 2010), pp. 177–78.
[29] Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centred Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), pp. 48–52, 164-67.
[30] Paul Scott Wilson, *Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), pp. 16, 88, 93, 120, 156, 170, 269.

2.3 Hints of another type of plot

As already noted, some authors indicate another type of plot, usually without naming it. Some stress features that are more characteristic of revelatory plots, others hint at a different structure or weaknesses in the resolution plot. Lowry accepts that all the components of the resolution plot may not be present in a text, reversals may not be 180 degrees and the shift may be more gradual.[31] Key elements of revelatory plots may be disclosed in homiletical writing but as the revelatory plot is a constellation of characteristics this plot type is not easy to recognize. In what follows, some of the revelatory plot characteristics are grouped and illustrated with examples of places where homiletic writing appears to indicate them.

2.3.1 Character and insight

The importance of character is reflected in several writers. James Breech sees the parables as characterized by looking at the reality of people rather than looking through them.[32] Lowry is flexible in his thinking, although he stresses action, he includes the character-led plot as part of the resolution plot and describes being drawn into the interior of a character’s consciousness and looking *with* characters in order to understand how they perceive other people or a situation.[33] Jensen talks of filling people’s heads with biblical people and these people living in the imagination and having a role in thinking through information and images. Jensen helpfully illustrates this by Garrison Keiller’s *Lake Woebegone* series where the audience is not held by the need to get to the end or resolve the situation, but by the people. The characters are drawn in such a way that listeners feel they know them and can identify with them.[34] If biblical characters are engaged with as physical beings embodied in material situations, then recognition and identification can thread relevance throughout a sermon.

In revelatory plots insight often comes through specific concrete details. The universal is known in and through the particular and the spiritual is experienced and known in and through the material. Insights are embodied in people, in situations, in objects and in things that can be sensed. A revelatory approach is a deeply embodied

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[31] Lowry, *The Homiletic Plot,* pp. 99–100. Lowry, *The Sermon*, pp.76–8.

[32] James Breech, *The Silence of Jesus*: *The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 98.

[33] Lowry, *How to Preach a Parable*, pp. 52–54, 77.

[34] Jensen, *Thinking in Story*, pp. 24-25, 63. Garrison Keiller, *News from Lake Woebegone* <https://www.garrisonkeillor.com/radio-categories/the-news-from-lake-wobegon/> [9 February 2021].

form. Childers talks of epiphany and illumination in reference to preaching as theatre, the theatre analogy is useful in aiding preachers to think in terms of the story as three dimensional rather than as written text.[35] For Jensen, narratives enable people to grasp more abstract or universal concepts through the particulars of storytelling, an insight he shares with many writers in this area.[36] Lowry concurs and uses detail to highlight what is important.[37] Paul Scott Wilson notes how small, concrete details can capture what is significant, he perceptively sums this up as, 'Small details paint bigger pictures of individual lives.'[38] Craddock, with his usual acumen, comments on the 'almost embarrassing specificity' of the Bible.[39] This is an aspect of Scripture that Christians often miss either from familiarity or from a sacred aura that surrounds the text and prevents people seeing what is there. In a similar way Day's imaginative use of language foregrounds the material and the senses. He uses the language of the visual and visceral becoming very detailed and embodying insights in the physical.[40]

If character and insights through the material are already accepted as important, why is there a need for another plot form? Insights gained through the ordinary concrete details of life can be part of any plot, but they are central to the revelatory plot. This does not deny the supernatural: the voice of God (Exodus 19:16–19), the dreams (Matthew 1:20–21), visitations (Luke 1:26), the control of nature (Exodus 14:21). Life, however, is not a sequence of such events, even for biblical characters. Long lapses of time occur where little happens, but the reader can gain insights into what is happening spiritually through the ordinary.

2.3.2 Reduced closure, ambiguity and non-linear movement

The invitational nature of the revelatory plot is partly created by reduced closure, ambiguity and non-linear movement. These aspects are reflected by many homiletic writers who accept a degree of mystery. Charles Campbell, writing on Hans Frei, crucially identifies the difference between mystery and resolution as a difference between 'exploring a mystery' rather than 'solving a problem'. For Frei, there was always mystery that should not be dissolved and there was a 'reserve of not

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[35] Childers. *Performing the Word*, pp. 44–45.
[36] Jensen, *Thinking in Story*, p. 22.
[37] Lowry, *How to Preach a Parable*, pp. 66–69.
[38] Paul Scott Wilson, *Four Pages of the Sermon*, p. 87.
[39] Craddock, *As One Without Authority,* p. 52.
[40] Day, *Embodying the Word*, pp. 2–3, 31–35.

knowing'. Jesus' story is ongoing in the Church rather than closed.[41] R.E.C. Browne's seminal book *The Ministry of the Word* is quoted by several writers. He talks of every creative act as an act of revelation and how the preacher must sometimes be content with partly describing those things that cannot be fully described. 'Every authentic proclamation of the Gospel has always a definite indefiniteness about it. The statement that rings with finality is false, it lacks the audacity of truthfulness which intentionally leaves rough edges.' Browne refers to oblique and ambiguous expression as there are times when preachers cannot be dogmatic. He states that, 'Religion is not a way of mastering this complexity but of bearing it.'[42]

Lowry's approach is nuanced, he affirms exploring complexity, and he speaks positively about living with mystery and negatively about preaching that destroys it. Although Lowry works towards a resolution, he eschews cheap or simplistic endings. His process is not about coming to doctrinaire conclusions and his focus on the complication stage prevents precipitous movement from problem to resolution. Lowry acknowledges that although Jesus Christ is the ultimate resolution, 'things have only just begun'.[43] The tension in Lowry's work, between the resolution plot and his acceptance of complexity, openness and mystery may be the result of not separating different types of plots but subsuming them under one embracing term, 'plot'. Craddock maintains that there can be a degree of incompleteness in preaching allowing room for congregations to complete the sermon and giving them space for their own response. This reflects confidence in both the text and the guidance of the Holy Spirit that obviates the need for closed conclusions for every sermon.[44] On a similar note, Eslinger recognizes that African-American preaching rarely has closure but has a sense of carrying on.[45] Brown Taylor, whose own preaching tends to be open and invitational, decries 'airtight' conclusions that do not allow the congregation to draw their own.[46] Paul Scott Wilson suggests that there is rarely a

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[41] Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: The New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Eugene: Wipf &Stock, 2006), p. 106. Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) <https://archive.org/details/identityofjesusc0000frei/page/n5/mode/2up> [9 February 2021], pp. 13, 158, 160–64. Internet Archive ebook.

[42] R.E.C. Browne, *The Ministry of the Word* (London: SCM, 1958), pp. 29, 33, 47, 55–58.

[43] Lowry, *The Sermon*, p. 41, 56, 86, 114. Lowry, *Doing Time in the Pulpit,* p. 56. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot,* pp. 39–52.

[44] Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, pp. 54–55.

[45] Eslinger, *The Web of Preaching,* p. 140.

[46] Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, (Plymouth: Cowley Publications, 1993), p. 88.

need to ‘tie everything up’.[47] This will be a change of thinking for some preachers who may feel the need to give the congregation a sense of certainty concerning truth. This desire is understandable and congregations should not be left floundering, however a sense of assurance can be given and still retain freedom of congregational response. This is important for revelatory preaching, which is invitational by nature.

Some homileticians incorporate a degree of open-endedness in their work as a reflection of the text or the intention of the sermon. Greidanus notes that not all biblical plots are resolved, some are only partly resolved, or the resolution is postponed; God’s promise of being a great nation is only potentially fulfilled with the birth of Isaac; God’s promise of land does not begin to be fulfilled until Abraham purchases a field in which to bury Sarah. A sermon on the death of Sarah in a revelatory style would put the emphasis on the negotiations, which is where Greidanus notes the text puts the emphasis, not on Sarah’s death which the text covers in just three verses.[48]

Surprisingly, a degree of openness is also seen in Buttrick’s work. His moves and the way he concludes sermons appear closed at first sight, he talks of closure as ‘crucial’, every move having closure, conclusions concluding and halting reflective consciousness. However, he acknowledges different types of conclusions governed by the intention of the sermon. Some of the examples he cites are relatively open in the sense that they do not present a single obvious resolution, some end in doxology or refection on mystery. Some sermons, by their nature, have a more open ending concluding with what Buttrick calls ‘a sweet brooding thoughtfulness’. He criticises sermons that present a strong closure in the form of a ‘closed circle’, a going back to the introduction and creating a sense of completion that might be aesthetically pleasing but not good for the on-going motivation of the congregation.[49]

The non-linear nature of the revelatory plot is reflected in some writers. John Wright and Richard Jensen both put the emphasis on the journey rather than the goal.[50] John Wright stresses moves that can change directions in ways more radical than a linear sequence. His imaginative analogy of movement as rock climbing rather

[47] Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), p. 225.
[48] Greidanus, ‘Detecting Plot Lines’, 64–77 (pp. 69–71).
[49] Buttrick, *Homiletic*, pp. 100, 105.
[50] Jensen, *Thinking in Story*, pp. 23–25.

than a ladder may capture something of the movement of the revelatory plot, even if it is unintentional.[51]

Clader notes that films often use non-linear forms and she goes on to describe films that reflect a more revelatory plot. Although Clader is still goal-orientated, her creative image of the route towards a goal as a river joined by many streams reduces any sense of relentless movement towards resolution. She argues for a playful, 'loosely packaged approach' which allows for participation. She translates this into preaching that ends with possibilities rather than an impression of finality, 'I find I have become more and more comfortable ending my homilies abruptly, finishing off with what I hope is a suggestive hint, rather than a conclusion.'[52]

How is the revelatory plot different if all these homileticians embrace a degree of mystery and reduced closure? The revelatory plot incorporates mystery in the form of ambiguity, non-linear progression and reduced closure as part of its essential composition rather than being an aspect that is acknowledged and affirmed but not given a place that is central to the sermon form.

2.3.3 Displaying life, scenic and painting-like qualities

Revelatory plots lay bare, show or display life, often in scenic form and with painting-like qualities. The specific nature of laying bare a 'slice of life' maintains its embodied form. These aspects of the revelatory plot are reflected across the homiletic literature. Day's understanding of sermon composition is broad and he speaks of a style of plot where the story moves from setting and development through to revelation and his recommendation of slice of life techniques draws on the revelatory side of plotting.[53] McKenzie, in her innovative book *Making a Scene in the Pulpit* emphasizes showing the gospel through a scenic presentation.[54] Schlafer understands that preaching as drama presents a 'slice of life' and 'frames it for observation', temporarily removing distractions, which allows the congregation to 'see'.[55] Both Charles Rice and Stephen Wright use the art analogy, which helps preachers think in a more presentational style. Rice notes that parables 'declare' as a painting does and he talks in artistic terms of preaching.[56] Stephen Wright talks of

[51] John W. Wright, *Telling God's Story*, pp. 77–78.
[52] Clader, *Voicing the Vision,* pp. 103–110.
[53] Day, *Embodying the Word*, pp. 74–82, 100, 118.
[54] McKenzie, *Making a Scene*, pp. 52–53.
[55] Schlafer, *Playing with Fire*, pp. 69–70.
[56] Charles L. Rice, *The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art and Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 77–78.

creative speech forming a work of art.[57] This analogy puts the emphasis on drawing people into a scene rather than explaining it. In Lowry's later and more reflective book *The Homiletical Beat*, and the afterward of *The Homiletical Plot* Lowry allows for a less linear, more episodic and scenic movement.[58] Stephen Matthewson notes the importance of type scenes and suggests describing a scene as they often carry the central meaning of a narrative.[59] Although Buttrick's moves are linear and sequential, his description of the point of view within moves has a scenic quality and could relate to revelatory plots, particularly in his mode of immediacy. He uses the language of composition and his stress on establishing the mood or tone of each move relates to the atmosphere of different scenes.[60] There is already a recognition of the scenic and painting-like qualities of preaching and the need to show or display life, this could provide a basis for the revelatory plot.

2.3.4 Pace, time, suspense and indirect cause-effect

Pace may seem a strange way to promote relevance, but the reduced pace of the revelatory plot gives time for the congregation to relate to the characters and the situations of biblical narratives. Day realistically faces up to the problem that stories may have lost their force as the ending is often known, therefore there is little suspense. He notes that Bible stories often move too quickly for people to feel their power, so the preacher slows the pace with detailed storytelling. He also uses anachronisms to disrupt the time sequence and link the text to contemporary life.[61]

Browne and Lischer both break with the logical and temporal order that characterizes much preaching. Lischer recognizes what he calls the 'minority report' of Modernist writers. He notes that they place things alongside each other rather than in logical, temporal order and this may reflect the way life is for many people.[62] Browne also argues that people's minds frequently work by association, which is the way causation is often presented in revelatory texts.[63] Surprisingly, when Buttrick discusses plotting he includes what he describes as a 'modern' plot: non-linear, psychological and told from different characters' perspectives.[64] This indicates that

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[57] Stephen I. Wright, *Alive to God's Word*, p. 59.
[58] Lowry, *The Homiletic Beat*, pp. 38–39. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot,* pp. 128–29.
[59] Matthewson, *The Art of Preaching*, pp. 49–50, 142–43.
[60] Buttrick, *Homiletic*, pp. 23, 55–68, 77–79, 321–23.
[61] Day, *Embodying the Word*, pp. 53, 57–59.
[62] Lischer, 'The Limits of Story', p. 31.
[63] Browne, *The Ministry of the Word*, p. 61.
[64] Buttrick, *Homiletic*, pp. 289–290.

slowing the pace, and working by association rather than logical sequence and cause-effect already has some purchase in the homiletical literature.

2.3.5 Intertextuality and figurative language

Many of the writers of homiletic literature highlight figurative language, symbol and intertextuality, all characteristics emphasized in revelatory plots. Intertextuality is interaction between texts where one text may echo another or be used to interpret another; it can be like a palimpsest where one text is layered on top of others. Charles Campbell, writing on Hans Frei, notes his emphasis on figurative interpretation, particularly typology, as a way of expressing the unity of Scripture. Frei also emphasizes intratextuality, where interpretation is within a Scriptural framework, with different books of the Bible connecting and interpreting each other and together creating a unified narrative.[65] Richard Briggs' sermon (Appendix 1) exhibits both intertextuality and intratextuality. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and scriptural narratives such as Joseph and the Prodigal Son are used to interpret the main text.[66]

Many writers highlight the importance of metaphor and imagery, an example is Buttrick whose moves incorporate images, that he develops into an image grid.[67] Childers emphasizes images, imagination, association and combining in a non-linear fashion.[68] This is effectively developed by Kate Bruce in her work on imagination and imaginative speech.[69] Schlafer includes sermons shaped by images as one way of presenting a sermon, that comes under his designation of the preacher as poet.[70] The prevalence of creative language throughout homiletic writing suggests that moving to a revelatory form that has a particular stress on this type of language would not be difficult for many preachers. It is a matter of emphasis, for creative language is part of many styles of preaching.

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[65] Campbell, *Preaching Jesus,* pp. 37, 79, 99, 250–57. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 2-6.
[66] Richard Briggs, 'Judges 11: 28–40', in *Wrestling with the Word,* ed. by Bruce and Harrison, pp. 64-80.
[67] Buttrick *Homiletic*, pp. 116–125, 153–170.
[68] Childers, *Performing the Word*, pp. 109–110.
[69] Kate Bruce, *Igniting the Heart: Preaching and Imagination* (London: SCM Press, 2015), pp. 55–84.
[70] David Schlafer, *Your Way with God's Word*: *Discovering Your Distinctive Preaching Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications: 1995), pp. 63–65.

2.4. A call for embodiment

The biggest indication of a need for a different type of preaching is a call for embodiment. Embodiment is ideas, emotions and qualities expressed in forms that can be perceived through the senses. It is life lived in the flesh in the material world, for it is through the body that human beings think, feel, and apprehend the world. Embodiment is a feature of both the resolution and revelatory plot, but it is particularly emphasized in the revelatory plot with its embodied insights and stress on displaying characters and the material situation. The call for embodiment is concentrated in the work of Charles Rice and David Day, but there are indications of it throughout the homiletic literature.

2.4.1 Charles Rice and David Day

Charles Rice published *The Embodied Word* in 1991. It faces the preacher's task of holding together the community's life in the flesh and the spiritual life of prayer and worship. The Word becomes disembodied when cut off from the everyday life of the community and the embodiment integral to the sacraments. In the light of the Christian affirmation of the body and the material world, Rice asks if there is a rhetoric or style that is 'particularly suited to such an affirmation.'[71] Rice's focus is on the down-to-earth rhetoric of Jesus and finding a current style that reflects the gospels, a style that bears witness to a God come amongst humanity in the flesh. Rice realizes that he is following Craddock who thought there was such a thing as a style that was appropriate for the Christian message, an indirect one that reflected the incarnation as a model.[72] Although Rice uses the singular 'style' he does not appear to be thinking in terms a particular approach. A range of approaches could use an embodied style, though he leans towards the narrative and quotes Amos Wilder who identified narrative as a style congenial to the gospel and used by the Early Church because, 'The locus of the new faith was in concrete human relationships and encounters.'[73]

Rice is not afraid of pointing out that Jesus' language was generally non-religious; Jesus tended to use ordinary language and refer to the commonplace

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[71] Rice, *The Embodied Word*, pp. 18–24, 43, 71–72.
[72] Rice, *The Embodied Word*, pp. 72–73. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel,* rev. edn (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), pp. 69–70.
[73] Rice, *The Embodied Word*, p. 73. Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), <https://archive.org/details/earlychristianrh0000wild> [accessed 9 February 2021], p. 69.

realities of earthly existence. He did use explicit theological language on occasions, but even the word ‘God’ does not appear very often in Jesus’ teaching. The embodied God used thoroughly embodied language to address embodied people. Jesus used speech that was both ‘human and realistic’. The language of Jesus’ parables and word-images is both imaginative and earthy. Rice describes Jesus as having confidence in the stuff of everyday life and in ordinary human experience to be the vehicle of revelation of God’s presence. Jesus’ parables are about cooking and landlords, muggings and family life.[74] Rice is not alone, Paul Ricoeur designated the parables as ‘radically profane’,[75] and Edmund Steimle describes the Bible as more secular than sacred.[76] For Rice, Jesus’ stories and images are about helping people to see differently and to gain a clarity of vision, enabling them ‘to see things as they really are’ and to see God as present in this material world and in human lives. Rice quotes Amos Wilder who comments that, ‘Jesus […] shows that for him human destiny is at stake in his ordinary creaturely existence, domestic, economic and social.’[77] This is a bold position to take in a context where the spiritual is often mistakenly linked to the things that are not of this world and where spirituality is rising above them. A congregation may not be used to down-to-earth language in a sermon and recognition of the spiritual status of sermons that use such language could be an issue.

Rice describes Jesus’ parables as having both an ‘attachment to the commonplace’ and a transforming quality. Such language is imaginative and metaphorical and presents the world in all its concrete particularity. It is the language of speech not writing. Rice comments on Jesus’ spare and simple language in the parables. Only the bare bones of a narrative are given (Luke 10. 25–37). This earthed presentation of life in parables is similar to the way a painting or a drama based on real events presents life. Its simplicity and depth come from the type of attention that artists cultivate, it is being able to see what is there and what is significant.[78] This can bring both recognition and the revelation of something new.

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[74] Rice, *The Embodied Word*, pp. 74–75.
[75] Paul Ricoeur, *Listening to the Parables of Jesus*, in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. by Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), pp. 239–245 <https://archive.org/details/philosophyofpaul00ricu> [accessed 9 February 2021] (p. 239). Internet Archive ebook.
[76] Edmund A. Steimle, ‘The Fabric of the Sermon’, in *Preaching the Story*, ed. by Edmund A. Steimle, Morris J. Niedenthal and Charles Rice (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 163–175 (pp. 165–66).
[77] Rice, *The Embodied Word*, p. 76. Amos Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, p. 74.
[78] Rice, *The Embodied Word*, pp. 77–82.

David Day, writing fourteen years after Charles Rice, reiterates and develops many of Rice's themes in his book *Embodying the Word*. He acknowledges that there are different ways in which preachers can embody the Word. It can be embodied in language or by interacting with objects, pictures, literature and drama. He laments that too often the Word that became flesh is turned to mere words again. Can ideas be returned to a physical, sensory form? He calls it a homiletical version of the principle of incarnation.[79] This striking comment was partly the impetus for this thesis.

Day affirms the spiritual as present in the material and needing the material to manifest itself. Always practical, he lists how embodiment might be expressed in practice, using images, examples and stories; in choosing the concrete and the specific rather than precepts, general abstract statements and distilled truth. Foreseeing criticism, Day insists that this is not an abandonment of the abstract and doctrine but ways of making them live. Once again, the problem of congregational perception may be an issue, they may not recognize doctrine in narrative form. Day uses the term 'a slice of life' and advocates using examples, case studies, stories and dilemmas as these are ways of helping people see an idea through an expression of it in life. However, the examples need to be authentic, specific and presented rather than reported in general terms. Taking Day's advice, a sermon about prayer might eschew a generalised statement about distraction in favour of an example such as, 'Our Father who art in heaven ("Did I turn the oven off?").' Abstract and general statements that have not been fleshed out in specific examples can leave listeners distanced from the sermon, which may imply divine distance. Stories where congregants see ideas embodied in people and situations are more likely to engage as they can resonate with listener's experience.[80]

For Day, figurative language is an indication of embodied preaching as such language uses the material world to communicate. He uses images to make truth visible and available to the senses, a window into reality rather than an escape from it. He creatively combines words and images as one does not have to detract from the other. Embodying an idea in an image can aid understanding as it becomes less abstract. The great doctrines began life as pictures of real situations; the slave market underlies redemption and a goat being driven into the wilderness is the basis for the concept of atonement. In narrative, word images also function as a concrete form. He

[79] Day, *Embodying the Word*, p. 2.
[80] Day, *Embodying the Word*, pp. 2–3, 74–78, 92, 107–08.

points out that before Paul wrote about justification, Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). A successful image (verbal or visual) makes a point of contact between its world and the referent, and it can give a new way of seeing the world. Images link to the senses and can imprint on the memory. They can change the way people think. Day suggests imaginative ways of entering the story such as Ignatian methods or imagining the story as a film. Both methods involve ‘seeing’ the text as a concrete situation. The imaginative retelling that results involves expanding and even inventing details but Day’s is no unrestrained imagination, it is under the control of the text and ‘disciplined’ by critical methods.[81]

Preachers deal in the profound and as a result of this Day acknowledges that it is easy to drift into the abstract and forget the prosaic and untidy nature of everyday life. From the pulpit, life can be made too straightforward, too neat and tidy. Day does not shy away from physical language, he emphasizes listening to the body and quotes Brown Taylor who calls for ‘a visceral connection with Scripture’, a connection that is felt in the body and through the senses, not just a cerebral connection.[82] Day also draws on Thomas Troeger’s work, who advocates walking through a biblical incident, feeling ‘the bodily weight of the truth’ and turning the text into movement. Much biblical language is ‘close to the nerve and bone of being human’.[83] Preaching language needs a physical quality, an issue discussed in chapter five.

Day advocates using the rhythms of speech rather than writing, using direct rather than reported speech in the active voice where possible. In such speech, sentences become shorter and verbs and nouns stronger. He encourages preachers to look for narratives behind non-narrative parts of the Bible: laws, epistles, psalms etc. He uses touches of anachronism to bring biblical situations into the present. His advice on working backwards to the sensed experiences that the texts reflect (‘a return journey’) shows a trust in the way texts relate to reality in some way.[84] Day’s well-argued and comprehensive book plots a route to more embodied sermons that is both practical and achievable.

The work of Rice and Day shows the importance of the concept of embodiment for preaching and the need for an embodied form. Although

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[81] Day, *Embodying the Word*, pp. 30–33, 59.
[82] Day, *Embodying the Word*, pp. 9-10, 33. Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, p. 82.
[83] Day, *Embodying the Word*, p. 34. Thomas H. Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), pp. 53–56.
[84] Day, *Embodying the Word*, pp. 2, 36, 39, 57–59.

embodiment is the focus of Rice and Day, it remains to be seen if it is present across the homiletic literature. Is the homiletical climate hospitable to a *systematically* embodied form such as the revelatory style?

2.4.2 Embodiment in homiletical literature

Throughout much of the homiletic literature there is a need expressed for embodied preaching. Barbara Brown Taylor states this explicitly, 'Creatures of flesh, we learn best by flesh. Our bodies are primary sources of revelation for us'.[85] The concerns cluster around the use of language. Embodiment is a feature of all narrative preaching and is endorsed by Lowry throughout his writings. Revelatory and resolution plots do not take up contrasting positions on this issue, it is a matter of degree and emphasis. Lowry is practical and talks of asking small concrete questions and dealing in lived realities. He believes that actions and objects can take on wider significance, the concrete can stand for the abstract and the quickest route to the universal and general is through the particular.[86] This reflects the way we live; we live inductively, our experiences are specific not general; vegetarians do not eat vegetables, they eat broccoli and peas. Food, like most of life, is only experienced in the particular. Both Craddock and Cahill maintain that this way of working reflects life, which is experienced in concrete and specific situations. Craddock affirms that points of identification are easier to locate in specific instances rather than in generalities, which is crucial if the sermon is to be perceived as relevant.[87] The general is rooted in the particular rather than the particular being an illustration of the general. Greidanus' careful exposition of the text draws attention to this in the way God's promise of land to Abraham is fulfilled, not in an overtly religious action, but in the concrete activity of buying a field.[88]

Bruce highlights preaching's concern with God who is at work in the material world and as a result, sermons need earthing in matter.[89] Schlafer maintains that a sermon is about particular persons, settings, objects and emotions experienced through the senses rather than being primarily about abstract generalizations,

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[85] Barbara Brown Taylor,' On This Rock', in *Preaching Through the Year of Matthew: Sermons that Work,* ed. by Roger Alling and David J. Schlafer (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2001), pp. 143–47 (p. 143).
[86] Lowry, *Doing Time in the Pulpit,* pp. 16, 48, 76. Lowry, *How to Preach a Parable*, pp. 62, 149-52.
[87] Cahill, *The Shape of Preaching*, p. 33. Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 130. Craddock, *As One Without Authority,* pp. 47, 50–51.
[88] Greidanus, 'Detecting Plot Lines', 64–77 (p. 7).
[89] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart*, p. 99.

concepts and ideas. These details can be held up for the congregation to 'see'.[90] The visual metaphor many of these writers use is key, for the preacher enables people to perceive a scene through the senses that is primarily a metaphorical form of vision but can involve the other senses. This is like the cloth a surgeon puts over a patient in surgery, a hole is cut revealing just the area of focus. To continue the surgical analogy, the rest of the patient is not ignored but the cloth frames the area of focus for detailed attention. In revelatory preaching a preacher displays a significant part of the narrative for focussed attention, removing for a while anything that may distract.

The creeds jump from birth to passion and Christianity has been guilty in undervaluing the earthly ministry of Jesus according to Michael Ball.[91] This is true of the creeds and many worship songs, but it is not true of preaching that follows the lectionary. Craddock penetrates to the central issue when he talks of a 'mundane concreteness' in the parables that takes life seriously rather than as an illustration of the spiritual world. He registers preachers' reluctance to become specific and accurately diagnoses it as a fear of concreteness and 'thingification', an unwillingness to let things be things rather than illustrations of something else.[92] This unwillingness can be born of an anxiety; if the sermon engages too deeply with material life will the congregation see it as lacking in spirituality? However, taking material life seriously is what helps a congregation see the relevance of the Bible for they find in it an affirmation life as it is lived.

Language is one of the areas where there is a call for more embodiment. All narrative requires embodied language, but the revelatory plot's emphases make this particularly pertinent. Embodied language is the language of this world and is the language of presentation rather than explanation. Edmund Steimle goes as far as saying that if preachers followed the Bible, preaching would be more worldly and secular.[93] These are potentially provocative terms to use and they are open to misunderstanding but they communicate the nature of embodied language that can speak of the spiritual in the language of the world, rather than seeing the things of this world as a jumping off point for the spiritual.

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[90] Schlafer, *Playing with Fire*, pp. 63, 72, 106–7.
[91] Michael Ball, *The Radical Stories of Jesus: Interpreting the Parables*, Regent Study Guides, 8 (Oxford: Regents Park College, 2000), p. 145.
[92] Craddock, *As One Without Authority,* p. 50.
[93] Steimle, 'The Fabric of the Sermon', in *Preaching the Story,* ed. by Steimle, Niedenthal and Rice, pp. 165–66.

Craddock astutely sums up embodied language as reflecting the sights and sounds of this world, not just reflecting on them.[94] This is about language that creates a world rather than explains one. Ronald Allen comments that in the ancient world the listener/reader did not have a text explained, rather they entered its world.[95] There is a huge difference between explaining and presenting a world. Explanatory language has its place, but information embodied in a person or situation can have more impact. Explanation is more distant than presentation, as illustrated below:

> Explanatory: In the first century women were considered to be of lower status than men, and boys were deemed to be more important than girls. Age rather than youth conferred status.
>
> Presentational: Mary walks with her head down, she is used to lowering her eyes, she is, after all, only a girl; older women, boys and men take precedence over her.

Embodied language is specific. Richard Lischer quotes Helmut Thielicke's striking example of specific language. Thielicke posited what might have happened if a Christian had protested at a Nazi rally. If there had been a Christian shouting 'Jesus is Lord' he or she would probably have been ignored. If this imaginary Christian had been specific and asserted not only Jesus' lordship but also denounced pseudo lords such as Adolph Hitler, he or she would probably have been killed. Lischer relates worldly language to the incarnation, which means that preachers can speak the language of this world in order to speak of God. Such worldly language does not reduce the radical nature of the gospel, it has the opposite effect. Academic and religious language can rob preaching of its impact; it can make the incredible sound dull and distant. Such language is not capable of either moving or offending people, for it does not reach them at any depth and does not appear relevant. Religious language can insulate, for it is language that maintains its distance and is 'semi-cryptic'.[96]

Embodied language is the language of bodies. Brown Taylor comments, 'I have always thought that believers in the Word made flesh have an implicit duty to

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[94] Craddock, *As One Without Authority,* p. 63.

[95] Ronald J. Allen, 'Shaping Sermons by the Language of the Text', in *Preaching Biblically*, ed. by Wardlaw, pp. 29–59 (p. 34).

[96] Richard Lischer, *Theories of Preaching: Selected Readings in the Homiletical Tradition* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1987), pp. 300–03.

attend to physical details in the language they use.'[97] An example of this is when King Josiah gets serious with God and it involves repairing the temple. His is not just a mental and emotional commitment; the text (II Kings 22:3-7) shows that it involved turning the temple area into a building site. That practical commitment can be reflected in the sermon in language that communicates the physical realities of a building site.

The language of the Bible may be spare, impressionistic, and imaginative but it remains earthed. Metaphor and other forms of figurative language use features of this world to communicate more abstract ideas. Isaiah uses the physical to communicate the spiritual when he describes the great empires as 'A drop in the bucket' compared to God's power (Isaiah 40:15). Jesus used vivid and earthy pictures in his teaching and preaching: a camel going through the eye of a needle (Mark 10:25), bridesmaids locked out of a wedding (Matthew 25:1-13). The use of such images can help people experience a narrative rather than stand outside of it. Because images have their origins in the world, they can embed in the congregation's imagination and be dwelt upon. Spare and impressionistic language reflects embodied life as our sensory experience is fragmentary. This style applies to all narrative preaching but is the hallmark of revelatory styles. Craddock reassuringly asserts that preachers do not have to attempt detailed description, hearers can complete the image. The preacher needs to give enough for the listener to enter the story, to identify and become 'enrolled'. Overdetailed descriptions do not have the ring of truth.[98] Jensen notes that as God's revelation comes through the world he created, preachers can use material that is not overtly religious as part of an engagement with the gospel.[99] Large chunks of reality are, however, difficult to deal with and the text may cover too much of life. The preacher may choose a small portion, just a scene or a character that can carry a large part of the text. Throughout the homiletical literature there is a call for embodied thinking and language, language that reflects this world and material existence. The revelatory style gives preachers a way of incorporating this into preaching at every stage.

2.4.3 Pitfalls

[97] Barbara Brown Taylor, 'The Reign of God is Like…', in *Preaching Through the Year of Matthew,* ed. by Alling and Schlafer, pp. ix–xii (p. ix).
[98] Craddock *As One Without Authority*, pp. 76–77. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, p. 106.
[99] Jensen, *Thinking in Story*, pp. 91–92.

David Day is aware of various pitfalls with embodiment. There may be a danger that specific examples can leave part of the congregation feeling that it has nothing to do with them and this practice can raise the issue of stereotyping. Day rightly thinks this is exaggerated; people need examples to grasp concepts. He sees sticking to abstractions, which may not relate to anyone, as a high a price to pay to avoid some people being unable to relate to an example. He advises spreading examples across a range of life situations and characters. Stereotyping can be avoided by drawing more complex characters rather than standardised figures. He emphasizes the need for credibility. The use of exceptional Christians of the past may sometimes inspire but more often they seem beyond the reach of most Christians. When instances of love, faith, forgiveness, and other Christian virtues are embodied in ordinary people, at home and in the workplace, they are more likely to relate to the congregation and be perceived as relevant.[100]

Another drawback identified by Day is the difficulty of creating embodied language; it is easier to use the language of abstraction and generalities. There can be problems with embodiment through word images, they may dominate, conflict or take people off at a tangent if not carefully selected and handled. There are also some biblical images that it would not be appropriate to dwell on (sexual and violent) as that it would be both unethical and unhealthy to evoke. This does not preclude preaching on difficult texts, the caveat concerns handling such texts in a pastorally responsible manner. An example of the careful handling of a difficult text can be seen in Appendix 1.

2.5 A theology of embodiment

A theology of embodiment is not presented theoretically in the Bible, it is something inferred from texts that engage with humanity and the relationship with creation. The Bible presents the world as God's and affirmed as good in its material nature; The world is also fallen and not as God intended, however, despite this the Bible manifests a positive view of God's interaction with the material world, even a Post-Fall one. God's involvement with the world endorses setting in time and place as appropriate domains to both experience and learn about God, which is vital for the revelatory approach that recognizes the role of these in understanding the spiritual import of a text.

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[100] Day, *Embodying the Word*, pp. 79–80, 83–88.

David Wilkinson emphasizes God's ongoing interaction with this fallen world. God is no absentee creator; he dwells with his people (Exodus 19:45) and God's faithfulness is accomplished within the framework of social and political life. It is God who continues to hold the universe in being with all things dependent on his power. God works in the world through the Spirit, through the physical laws of the universe and in specific incidences; it is seen in Christ, in miracles, in the Parousia, in redemption and judgement. The world is not closed to God's action. Contemporary scientific views of an open, relational and dynamic universe do not present a problem for God acting in the world in the way mechanistic closed views do, though God's work may be hidden. God has purposes for this world, it will be renewed and Christ's bodily resurrection is a foretaste of that renewal and an affirmation of God's commitment to creation. The hope of a new creation is important for living in this created world for there will be both continuity and discontinuity. This world has value, what is done in this world matters, the work of renewal has already begun.[101]

Jürgen Moltmann asserts that creation is not an isolated event; creation is an ongoing process that will not be completed until recreation. Humanity is a created community and God is present in his world; transcendence is tempered by immanence. The very act of creation is part of God's communication with humanity, which is motivated by love. God reveals himself as creator and sustainer of the universe and God is active in the world by his Spirit but God is not identified with creation.[102]

The relational nature of creation is also important for a revelatory approach where character takes a lead role. Creation is the action of the triune God. The doctrine of the trinity puts relationship at the heart of the Godhead which confers a lack of necessity, God chooses a relationship with humanity. Mary Timothy Prokes stresses the garden setting of relationships in the early chapters of Genesis; from the beginning there is intimacy with God, which is not presented abstractly (Genesis 2:8–9, 15–25, Genesis 3:8).[103] The early chapters of Genesis present this world as God's creation, created by divine fiat and affirmed not only as good, (Genesis 1: 10,

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[101] Wilkinson, pp. 64, 69, 75, 86–87, 100, 104–105, 110-113, 138-39, 170–175.
[102] Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God: The Gifford Lectures 1984–1985*, trans. by Margaret Khol (London: SCM Press: 1985), pp. 13–15, 55–56, 70, 76, 96–98, 206–212.
[103] Mary Timothy Prokes, *Toward a Theology of the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 60–61.

12, 18, 21, 25) but very good (Genesis 1:31). The revelatory focus on embodiment resonates with this verdict on creation.

The world and its people were created good but have been distorted by sin (Romans 5:12) and need redemption and reconciliation (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:19–20).[104] Is a revelatory approach justified in focusing on the world, as reflected in biblical narratives, when it is fallen? Both Testaments show the world as an appropriate arena for God to act. God does not withdraw after the Fall. Tom Wright expresses the redemption of the world in terms of its eternal destiny in the new creation, which is not an abandonment of the present creation but its redemption and recreation. Salvation in the Gospels is physical and spiritual; the two are not separated. Jesus' actions of healing and caring were not a 'visual aid' for the spiritual message of salvation, they were salvation as both present and a hope for the future. Salvation extends to creation. There is both continuity and discontinuity between the present world and its redeemed condition. What is done in this world can have lasting value. This gives value to human actions and changes attitudes to the world, the body and physical existence.[105]

2.5.1 Physical life in the Old Testament

The revelatory approach seeks insights from embodied existence, but does the Bible endorse human and terrestrial physicality? Paula Gooder underscores God creating integrated persons. The human body is created and given life by God (Genesis 2:7) and man becomes a 'living being'. The Hebrew word *nephesh* underlies this phrase and is often translated 'soul'. It is the life-force that creates a unified person, not a body with a detachable soul.[106] Problems in relating to God are not defined in terms of dissonance between the physical nature of humanity and the non-physical nature of God; the problem is located in sinfulness. The body can praise God in dance and song (Psalm 150) or can sin in murder and adultery (II Samuel 11). The Bible shows people responding to God as integrated beings; materiality and spirituality are not pitted against each other.

Material life receives full recognition in the Old Testament. Jacob Licht notes the significance of small earthy details in the lives of biblical characters. In I Samuel 1:9–18 nothing much happens beyond Hannah's grieving and silent praying.

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[104] Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 234–35.
[105] Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2011), pp. 37–38, 204–05.
[106] Paula Gooder, *Body: Biblical Spirituality for the Whole Person* (London: SPCK, 2016), pp. 33–36.

These mundane events are shown as important in themselves and accorded dignity by the writer.[107] God is shown as involved in the big and small affairs of life. This is an ordinary spirituality that engages with the realities of existence: physical, emotional and spiritual. God's interaction with Israel is concrete and specific, it takes place in time, in a particular geographical setting and through people. The biblical text has no qualms about sexuality and bodily functions, the Old Testament weaves laws covering sex, food and toilets with laws concerning worship and festivals (Deuteronomy 12:1-32; 14:1-21; 16:1-16; 22: 13-30; 23: 12-14).

Such a positive start endorses an embodied approach, however, the Bible's attitude towards physical life was not always interpreted positively. The Bible's own, sometimes confusing, use of language and Greek philosophy led to attitudes towards the physical body and the material world that at best undervalued it, or at worst perceived it as negative.

2.5.2 Greek philosophy

Christianity was born into a world dominated by Greek philosophy, which had many positive aspects but its thinking concerning the body and the material world was to influence both Judaism and Christianity in a negative way. Greek philosophy was not monolithic, a range of views existed, but dualism and a negative attitude to the material world characterised much Hellenistic thinking.

Plato and Socrates developed the idea of the soul that was superior to the body and could ultimately live apart from the body after death. The soul experiences the body as a limiting factor, it is a prison from which people sought escape, and the senses are a distraction and a hindrance. Humanity is enslaved to the body and its cares hinder pure thought. The aim was to tame the dominance of the body.[108] The Jewish philosopher Philo tried to reconcile Hellenic philosophy and Judaism. He went further than Plato, seeing the body as a tomb and a source of evil.[109]

Gnosticism was a belief system emerging in the Romano-Greek world as Christianity began and Thomas Long sees these beliefs as still influencing people today. There were many types of Gnosticism, but certain basic beliefs characterized

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[107] Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible,* 2nd edn (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), pp. 9–10, 114–15.
[108] Plato, *Phaedo,* trans by David Gallop, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975 <http://cscs.res.in/dataarchive/textfiles/textfile.2010-09-15.2713280635/file> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp.8-12, 28, 31. Gooder, *Body*, pp. 19–21.
[109] Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation 1* <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book2.html> [accessed 10 February 2021], sections 104-108.

these groups. They saw matter as opposed to the world of the spirit, and humanity's problem was ignorance rather than sin. Humanity had a divine spark that was imprisoned within the body and the aim was to escape the material world and the body and to achieve union with God. Gnostic spirituality was timeless, disembodied and ahistorical.[110]

2.5.3 Physical life in the New Testament

Prokes notes that both testaments emphasize the unity of the human person and positive attitudes to the body are inferred from Christ's incarnation, manual work, healing ministry and his bodily death, resurrection and ascension.[111] The Gospels show Jesus caring for people as a whole, forgiving sins, healing (Mark 2:1–12), teaching and caring for people emotionally (Mark 6:31–44; Matthew 11:28–30). Touch was also an integral part of Jesus' ministry; he clasped the hand of a dead girl (Mark 5:21–43), touched lepers (Mark 1:40–41), smoothed clay on blind eyes (John 9:6), and embraced children in blessing (Mark 10:16).

The apostle Paul's thinking was developed through his engagement with the young churches who lived in a world where Greek philosophy was the prevalent way of thinking and Gnosticism was an increasing influence. Gooder notes that despite this, Hellenistic thinking was not the greatest influence on Paul. He does not contrast body and soul, and his use of the word soul (*psuchē*) owes more to Hebrew than Greek thinking. Paul often uses *psuchē* to refer to the whole person, their life, in the sense of who they really are, and this includes the body (Colossians 3:23). This reflects the Old Testament understanding of the person; in Matthew 2.20 Herod seeks the *psuchē* of the infant Jesus. Paul's use of the word *psuche* corresponds largely to the Hebrew word *nephesh,* the integrated person, the living being animated by the lifeforce (Genesis 2.7). For Paul, life is more than just a body, but body and soul are not separated. Paul develops contrasts but is not dualistic; he contrasts flesh (*sarx)* and spirit (*pneuma*) rather than body and soul. If sarx is only understood as body, Christianity does look negative concerning human physicality (Romans 8.1–8; Galatians 5.16–21). However, Paul's use of *sarx* is flexible, it sometimes means body (Philippians 3:4–5) but more often it means the human tendency to sin.

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[110] Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, pp. 68–78.
[111] Prokes, *Toward a Theology of the Body*, pp. 1–3, 58–59.

Increasingly, translators distinguish the several meanings of sarx, using phrases such as 'sinful nature' 'selfishness' and 'natural human desires'.[112]

Paul saw bodies as something precious that could be described as God's temple, not a tomb. The body could be presented to God as a living sacrifice (I Corinthians 6.19; Romans 12:1) and the actions of the body, such as eating and drinking, can be done to the glory of God (I Corinthians 10:31). It is humanity as an integrated being that stands in need of redemption and sanctification (I Thessalonians 5:23). Humans are beings with eternal destinies that includes a body (I Corinthians 15:42–44).

Like the word *sarx,* the word 'world' (*kosmos*) can have positive, neutral or negative connotations. Robert Bratcher notes three ways in which this word is understood. Neutrally, *kosmos* can just mean 'world' (Matthew 26:13). Positively, *kosmos* can mean 'universe' or all of God's creation (Acts 17:24). Negatively, *kosmos* can be the world in need of redemption, and worldly thinking and behaving is condemned in a way similar to sarx (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 2:2). The world is not condemned for its materiality.[113]

David Wilkinson notes how science, like the Bible, sees a person as a psychosomatic unity. Although reductionist views are still expressed, 'the weight of evidence' points towards an integrated view that is closer to the psychosomatic unity of both Old and New Testaments. Wilkinson further documents scientific insights that underscore the relatedness of the physical universe. Matter and bodies are not separate, both are deeply related and not the static entities of Newtonian physics, but dynamic and changing. Integration goes beyond body and soul to the relatedness of all physical things. There is an inbuilt relationality in the universe.[114] These understandings mean people and events cannot be separated from their physical environment, a crucial insight for a revelatory approach.

2.5.4 Greek influence on Christianity

The legacy of Greek influence on Christianity often leaves preachers with a negative attitude to the world and material existence. Tom Wright describes Christians as

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[112] Gooder, *Body*, pp. 29, 31–33, 39, 45–46, 64–65.
[113] Robert G. Bratcher, 'The Meaning of Kosmos, "World", in the New Testament', *Bible Translator,* 31 (1980), 430–34 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/026009438003100406> (pp. 430–34).
[114] David Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology,* pp. 138–39, 142–144.

assuming a 'soft version of Plato.'[115] Many of the Early Church Fathers were influenced by Neoplatonism seeing God as good but this world and materiality in a more negative way. Augustine saw the world as weighing down the mind and a person moved from the body towards the soul.[116] Ambrose spoke of 'the slime of the body'.[117] The things of this world point to what is beyond rather than having value in themselves. Dualism in the church did not necessarily mean the body was viewed as evil but it was downgraded, a source of temptation, something to be risen above. Timothy Gorringe names platonic philosophy as the worldview that made it difficult to prize the body and the world.[118] The relevance of human material life was reduced.

Despite the negative influence of some aspects of Greek philosophy on Medieval religious thinkers, Medieval Christianity was deeply embodied; biblical stories were told in sermons, paintings, stained glass and drama and medieval worship drew heavily on the senses. The Renaissance saw a renewed interest in the human form, particularly in art; artists such as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci drew detailed anatomical studies. This concentration on the physical form did not neglect the inner nature. With the Reformation there was more emphasis on the sermon and the mind in Protestant countries. However, in both the Protestant and Catholic world there was a tension between the stress on the spiritual and the mind and a recognition that all life is God's. Some artists gave more attention to the human nature of Christ and the physical setting of his ministry. Pieter Bruegel the Elder paints the holy family without halos, dressed in ordinary clothes and 'buried' within village scenes. In the Netherlands, both Catholic and Protestant artists developed landscape and still life as subjects in their own right, rather than as part of religious paintings. Gorringe notes that Reformed thinking engaged with the everyday imperfect world in recognition that it was a gift of God and Dutch painting of the Golden Age affirmed the reality and goodness of the ordinary.[119]

With the Enlightenment the emphasis changed so that the contrast was between mind and body. This led to abstract thought being valued above the

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115 Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 102.
116 Augustine *Confessions*, trans. by O. Bigg (London: Methuen, 1898) <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.95336/page/n7/mode/2up> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 242, 323. Internet Archive ebook.
117 Ambrose, *Hexameron*, p, 259.
118 Timothy J. Gorringe, *Earthly Visions: Theology and the Challenges of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 141–42.
119 Gorringe, *Earthly Visions*, pp. 114–15.

physical. Despite occasional positive developments, dualism in one form or another continued to influence Christianity and western thinking and this conflicted attitude towards the body is still expressed in art and some films. Crucifixion paintings and stained-glass images often show Jesus without body hair and Pamela Grace notes that the film *The King of Kings* presents Jesus as unlike an ordinary human being. He is often represented by his shadow and a voice rather than a full bodily presence. In the Crucifixion scenes Jesus has no underarm hair and is 'remarkably unbloodied'.[120] Clare Dawson describes Christian attitudes to matter as a tendency to give it 'the cold-shoulder' or treating it like library steps, something you use to get to higher shelves.[121] Revelatory preaching could play a part in counteracting this split between body and soul, spirit and matter and widen the spiritual relevance of material life.

Dualism between soul and body has been challenged by a re-examination of biblical thinking concerning embodiment and a trend toward a more integrated approach, though a wide range of beliefs continues to exist. The idea that people can operate with distinctions between thinking, feeling and acting contradicts reality. Jürgen Moltmann emphasizes human embodiment and the interrelatedness and integration of the physical and non-physical aspects of humanity. For Moltmann, embodiment defines creation, redemption and recreation. He talks of embodiment as 'the end of God's works in creation' and people as the image of God in their 'whole and particular bodily existence.'[122] David Brown affirms the presence of God 'mediated in and through the material', whether that is in nature or through human creations.[123] Revelatory preaching takes seriously Teilhard de Chardin's warning that those outside the church see Christians as 'deserters' from the world and the human race, people who are insulated from life by their religion and who hold human endeavour outside the Church of little worth. In contrast, de Chardin insists, 'Our faith imposes on us the right and the duty to throw ourselves into the things of the earth.'[124]

[120] Pamela Grace, *Religious Film: Christianity and the Hagiopic* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 73–77. *King of Kings*, dir. by Nicholas Ray (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1961).
[121] Clare Dawson, 'Christian Materialism', *Life of the Spirit,* 16.182 (1961), 87–91 <http://www.jstor.org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/stable/43705853> [accessed 10 February 2021] (p. 87).
[122] Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, pp. 244–47.
[123] David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 25.
[124] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960) <https://archive.org/details/divinemilieuessa00teil> [accessed 22 February 2021], pp. 37-39. Internet Archive ebook.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to investigate the influence of the resolution plot and whether the characteristics of the revelatory plot, particularly embodiment, already have some purchase in the homiletical literature. A brief survey of some of that literature showed that since Lowry's publication of *The Homiletical Plot*, the homiletical literature has tended to assume the resolution plot to varying degrees. However, faced with texts that do not resolve, or only partially resolve, many scholars have emphasized characteristics that are typical of the revelatory plot, such as openness, non-linear movement and displaying a 'slice of life'. Notable among these intimations of another type of plot is the call for embodiment. This chapter also aimed to investigate the status of the body and the material world in Scripture. Embodiment is affirmed in the Bible where creation is pronounced very good and God is encountered in the midst of everyday life and where bodily life and the things of this world are spiritually significant. None of these factors necessarily result in revelatory preaching, they could just indicate a looser form of the resolution plot, but they are all beginnings from which revelatory preaching could be developed. Theologically the Bible's account of creation, its view of bodily life and Gods continued involvement with the world gives a firm foundation to embodiment in preaching.

In chapter three I take time to consider art as a significant source of the revelatory plot and possible model from which preachers can learn. Chapter three is situated early for only if art can be shown to narrate, and do so in a revelatory style, can it be integrated into the rest of the thesis as a source and model for preachers wanting to use a revelatory approach.

Chapter Three
Art and Revelatory Narration

The intention of this chapter is to investigate the claim that monoscenic, synoptic and simultaneous art can be models for a revelatory approach that preachers can draw on. The sources for the resolution plot are many and varied across different media, in contrast the revelatory plot is a minor form in most media but this chapter seeks to demonstrate that monoscenic, synoptic and simultaneous art are significant sources of the revelatory plot. In order to explore these claims, these art forms must be shown to narrate and to do so in a revelatory style. This involves investigating how art narrates and the barriers to art's narrative status. This chapter aims to show that art not only has the ability to narrate in a revelatory style, but its narration goes beyond telling a story to interpretation, contemplation and spiritual and emotional engagement. This further demonstrates that synoptic, monoscenic and simultaneous art aligns with the revelatory plot in its participatory and invitational form and that relevance comes through recognition and identification.

Even if art can be shown to narrate in a revelatory style, a question persists; can preachers learn from artists who may not identify as Christians? The aim of the theological section of this chapter is to make the case for the image of God in humanity as a basis for learning from artists and other people, even if they do not share the Christian faith. In practise, many preachers already appear to be learning from artists. Increasingly art is being used alongside commentaries or as a visual commentary. The *Visual Commentary on Scripture* gives access to art with commentaries on the paintings for preachers.[1] The website *The Text This Week* has an art index to parallel the lectionary readings.[2] Resources such as the *Imaging the Word* series match artworks to the lectionary.[3]

3.1 Definition of terms

The basic question is whether art can narrate at all, but it is a question that needs refining as some art appears to narrate more than others. The Tate gallery defines

[1] *The Visual Commentary on Scripture* <https://thevcs.org/> [accessed 9 February 2021].
[2] *The Text This Week* <http://www.textweek.com/> [accessed 9 February 2021].
[3]Jann Cather Weaver and others, *Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource*, ed. by Kenneth Lawrence and Susan A. Blain, 3 vols (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1994, 1995, 1996).

narrative art simply as art that tells a story.[4] As earlier noted, sequential art and continuous art narrate using a series of scenes, with or without frames. The narrative quality of this type of art is not in question, but can a single unified image tell a story, and does it narrate in a revelatory style? In this thesis the discussion of art's ability to narrate is largely restricted to biblical representational painting though some reliefs and sculptures are also referenced. The type of artwork most preachers have access to is a unified image within a single frame that relates to a biblical story in some way. This raises further issues of definition as there are different types of single unified images. This thesis uses three terms for these art forms: monoscenic, synoptic and simultaneous.

The term 'monoscenic' is used to define narrative art that is a single scene from a single story in a single frame, where characters and actions integral to that scene appear once.[5] Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper* is an example of monoscenic art.[6] The term 'synoptic' references art where different moments from the same story appear together in a single frame. Actions and characters may be repeated anywhere within the compositional space, seldom in narrative order.[7] Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* (p.74) are an example of synoptic art; each panel contains scenes from a story that are not told in the original narrative order.[8] The term 'simultaneous' refers to art where events or scenes from different narratives occur in the same frame without the repetition of characters. Fra Angelico's *The Annunciation and Expulsion of Adam and Eve* combines two stories wide apart in time but whose themes relate.[9] It is over these three forms of narrative art that a question mark hangs concerning their ability to narrate. Monoscenic art appears to be a single moment; how can a painting of a single moment tell a story that is made up of many moments? How can

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[4] Tate Gallery, *Narrative* <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/n/narrative> [accessed 9 February 2021].

[5] Guy Hedreen, 'Narrative Art: Ancient Greece and Rome', in *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. by Jane Turner, 34 vols (London: Macmillan, 1996), XXII (1996), p. 514.

[6] Leonardo Da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, 1495–98, tempera and oil on plaster, 4.6m × 8.8m, Santa Maria Delle Grazie, Milan <https://www.leonardodavinci.net/the-last-supper.jsp> [accessed 9 February 2021].

[7] Hedreen, 'Narrative Art', p. 513.

[8] Lorenzo Ghiberti, *The Gates of Paradise*, 1425–1452, gilt bronze relief panels, *c.*79 × 79 cm, Museo dell 'Opera di Santa Maria Del Fiore, Florence <http://www.lorenzoghiberti.org/gates-of-paradise/> [accessed 9 February 2021].

[9] Randy Becker, 'Narrative Art: Late Medieval and Later', in *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. by Jane Turner, 34 vols (London: Macmillan, 1996), XXII (1996), p. 521.
Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation and Expulsion of Adam and Eve,* 1425–1426, tempera and gold on panel, 190.3 × 191.5 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/tools/image-gallery/a/annunciation-fra-angelico> [accessed 9 February 2021].

synoptic art, which often ignores the original narrative order, tell a story? In what sense can simultaneous images, which contain two or more stories in one frame, be said to narrate?

3.2 Every picture tells a story?

The history of how art has been used in the Christian community also seems to indicate their narrative quality but history shows art developed differing roles that went beyond just telling the story. These differing roles begin to point to art's revelatory narrative character.

Historically, visual biblical narratives of all styles had multiple functions: worship, instruction, interpretation, and contemplation, each of which were part of its narrative function. For clarity I have separated these roles chronologically but in any historical period art fulfilled multiple roles that drew on art's ability to narrate. It is a matter of changing emphasis. In the Early Church the icon had a prominent role in worship that continues in the Eastern Orthodox Church. However, William Dyrness notes that in the Eastern Orthodox tradition the figures depicted in icons became disengaged from their biblical narrative. They lost some of their historical-narrative context and became more timeless.[10] Icons still narrate but they veer toward the abstract and eternal. In the West, a strong narrative tradition developed, and Hans Belting maintains that 'Narrative, an essential part of Christian imagery, reflects the structure of the Christian faith.' Religious instruction was often in narrative form and narrative cycles of paintings were used to this end. In early narrative cycles, the essential and significant events of the texts were repeated in visual form and both written and visual narrative had a common instructive intention.[11]

Otto Pächt and Herbert Kessler consider the interpretive, rather than just instructional role of narrative picture cycles. Pächt notes that in Medieval art gesture is used to highlight significance.[12] Kessler describes twin approaches in Medieval art: sometimes the art gave the literal sense (the events) and the text drew out the spiritual significance. At other times, the position reversed with the text detailing

[10] William A. Dryness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 35–36.
[11] Hans Belting, 'The New Role of Narrative in Public Painting of the Trecento: "Historia" and Allegory', *Studies in the History of Art,* 16 (1985), 151–68 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42617840?seq=1> [accessed 9 February 2021] (pp. 151).
[12] Otto Pächt, *The Rise of Pictorial Narrative in Twelfth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p.10.

what happened and the art interpreting its spiritual import, often through typology.[13] The paired stained-glass windows in King's College Cambridge demonstrate this approach where one story is linked to another by significant elements that become an interpretive key. The resurrected Christ is paired with Jonah being cast on the shore after three days in the fish; others link Christ's entombment with Joseph cast in the pit and the scourging with the torments of Job.[14] Simultaneous art also has an interpretive function, the inclusion of Adam and Eve in an annunciation painting heralds the arrival of the second Adam, come to reverse the effects of the Fall (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:45). Twinned images and simultaneous art are an invitation to engagement and participation by the viewer who mediates on the connections which are not given by the artist.

Belting notes that a change began with Giotto (1266–1337), who put more emphasis on empathy and the involvement of the emotions in a visual narrative, which reflected a change in how the Bible was used in the Middle Ages. A new meditative and imaginative way of responding to Biblical narratives became popular.[15] Anne Derbes posits the role of Franciscans in this change with their emphasis on narrative and their Christocentric theology. The Franciscan influence is revealed in the way the Resurrection gave way to the cross, the way in which the triumphant Christ gave way to the suffering Christ and a stoical Mary was replaced with a grief-stricken one.[16]

Narrative painting also began to mirror the world more realistically and viewers saw sacred figures in contemporary clothes in streets they recognized. Giotto, however, also mirrored the inner person, not just the environment, and the image became a stage where the full drama of human emotions was played out. People were invited to join in the drama emotionally.[17] Giotto's *Lamentation* is an outstanding example of this.[18] Realistic scenes began to appear that enabled people to identify with characters and situations in biblical narratives, perceiving their significance. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's paintings are set in Flemish scenes of the time. In *The Census at Bethlehem*, Mary and Joseph are no bigger than anyone else,

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[13] Herbert L. Kessler, *Studies in Pictorial Narrative* (London: Pindar Press, 1994), pp. 25, 35–36.
[14] Wendy Beckett and George Pattison, *Panes of Glass: The Story of the Passion from King's College Chapel, Cambridge* (London: BBC Books, 1995), pp. 26–27, 40–43.
[15] Belting, 'The New Role of Narrative', 151–68 (pp. 151–52).
[16] Anne Derbes, *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy: Narrative Painting, Franciscan Ideologies, and the Levant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 4–11, 16–19.
[17] Belting, 'The New Role of Narrative', 151–68 (p. 153).
[18] Giotto, *Lamentation,* 1304–1306, fresco, 200 × 185 cm, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua <http://www.giotto-di-bondone.com/lamentation/> [accessed 9 February 2021].

just another peasant couple in a crowded town.[19] The theological significance lies in the ordinary nature of the scene; Mary and Joseph are small and do not stand out from the crowd, God's choice of the powerless is communicated by size and composition. The placing of biblical characters in contemporary clothes and settings signalled that these stories had ongoing relevance.

By the Renaissance, biblical narrative art had developed multiple roles that were often a combination of instruction, contemplation and interpretation. Despite a decline in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, visual biblical narration has persisted. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, artists such as Holman Hunt, Harriet Powers, Ford Madox Brown, James Tissot, Gustave Doré, Ossawa Tanner and Marc Chagall all produced biblical narrative artworks. Jules Lubbock perceives narrative art as in decline, replaced by other forms, but this is only true if the focus is on western art. The baton has passed to artists from Asia, Australasia, Africa and the Americas. The Australian Bible Society's *Our Mob, God's Story* narrates the biblical story from Genesis to Revelation in aboriginal art.[20]

3.3 Challenges to monoscenic art's ability to narrate

Common sense might tell people that 'every picture tells a story' and history may show that this has been believed for centuries, but neither of these make it so. Scepticism towards monoscenic art's ability to narrate has a long history. Significant deliberations on the problems and possibilities of visual narration were highlighted by Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72). The problems cluster around time and movement, for narratives move through time and it is movement that usually indicates time passing. These concerns are implicitly expressed in Alberti's *Della Pittura* (On Painting). Alberti uses the word 'istoria' of painting that depicts a story, seeing it as art's highest form that moved the soul of the beholder. Istoria means more than just 'a story' though it does not mean anything less. Istoria draws on ancient themes and shows the emotions of the characters, that in turn affects the emotions of the viewer. Alberti advised artists to consult poets and orators, for he did not draw a sharp distinction between the textual-verbal arts of literature and rhetoric,

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[19] Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Census at Bethlehem*, 1566, oil on wood panel, 116 × 164.5 cm, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-census-at-bethlehem> [accessed 9 February 2021].

[20] Jules Lubbock, *Storytelling in Christian Art from Giotto to Donatello* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. xi. *Our Mob, God's Story: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists Share Their Faith*, ed. by Louise Sherman and Christobel Mattingley (Sydney: Bible Society Australia, 2017).

and the visual arts of painting and sculpture. Alberti saw similarities in the way orators and painters expressed their art. He addressed the problem of how art presents movement, which happens in time, he advises artists to paint muscles, clothing and hair in motion rather than static.[21]

Great possibilities for narrative art emerged with Alberti, but he also sowed the seeds of the division of what would later become known as 'the arts of time' and 'the arts of space'. Alberti advocated drawing a quadrangle on the canvas, that he describes as 'an open window through which I see what I want to paint'. Alberti advised this 'open window' approach alongside single point perspective and strict rules of composition so that all the elements of a painting relate to each other as they would in nature.[22] This advice suggested painting one moment in time from one aspect. The idea of the single moment in time was born and with it the doubts that monoscenic paintings could tell stories. How can a single moment tell stories that consist of many moments? The stage was set for Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

If artists followed Alberti's 'single scene through a window' format it called into question art's ability to narrate, for stories have many scenes. Gotthold Lessing (1729–1781) explored the problem of the temporal nature of text and the spatial nature of art. In his *Laocoön* he highlighted the difference between arts of space, such as painting and sculpture, and arts of time, exemplified in literary forms. Lessing stressed the differences between these two forms, and he thought that each should keep to its proper sphere. Art should depict a single 'pregnant moment' chosen as the one with the most potential in terms of effect. This would not be the climax, as that leaves little room for imagination, but an earlier moment that anticipates the climax. Poetry (text) and painting occupy different territory; poetry's field (like narration) is consecutive actions in time ranging over successive moments. Painting's field is description because it deals in bodies and objects and brings all the parts before the viewer at once, at a glance. Lessing is adamant, each form should keep to its own domain and not encroach on the other's territory. Despite this, Lessing admits that the single moment in art may frequently become the extended moment but it is regrettable, and 'taking liberties' with poetry's domain.[23]

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[21] Alberti, *On Painting*, pp. 23–25, 63, 74–75, 90.
[22] Alberti, *On Painting,* pp. 56-58.
[23] Gotthold, Ephraim Lessing, *Lacoon: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. by Ellen Fotheringham (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1887) <https://archive.org/details/laocoonessayupon00lessrich/mode/2up> [accessed 9 February 2021], pp. 16–17, 21, 59, 91–92, 109–112, 120. Internet Archive ebook.

Lessing was not expounding anything new, similar views had been expressed earlier by Antony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury (1671–1713) in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711). Shaftesbury maintained that painting represented a single instant and once the artist had chosen a point in time, all other actions beyond that point were barred. Shaftesbury was concerned with the unity of time and action, which means one incident in one space which takes place at one time. For Shaftesbury, painting more than one instant produced a 'confused heap'. Despite this, Shaftesbury conceded that the artist could indicate future action and could leave traces of the preceding action. He cites the example of the tracks of tears that remain after the tears have stopped. The future can be shown in various ways, such as showing doubt but indicating the way a decision will go. To introduce time in any other way was to 'sin directly against the law of truth and credibility'.[24]

The views of Shaftesbury and Lessing cast doubt on monoscenic art's ability to narrate and their views have been very influential. Their influence is detected in views that put a sharp divide between text and image and deny or reduce the narrative ability of art because it is deemed to be unable to represent time passing as narration demands. These views are expressed by Otto Pächt; he describes the history of narrative art as 'a series of repeated attempts to smuggle the time factor into a medium that by definition lacks the dimension of time'.[25] Paul Barolsky upholds Lessing's dichotomy and appears to answer the question 'can art narrate?' entirely in the negative, entitling his article 'There is No Such Thing as Narrative Art'. He maintains that in one sense images do not narrate at all, artists 'show' they do not 'tell' stories. Barolsky claims that artists imply or allude to narratives, but they do not narrate.[26] Barolsky is not a lone voice, although Werner Wolf does not deny narrativity to art, he comments on monoscenic art's narrative 'deficiencies' and how it relies 'parasitically' on text. For Wolf, elements of narrativity, such as expression and body language, may only activate the viewers' general knowledge and narrative ability. A painting can never actually present a narrative, but it can point to one.[27]

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[24] Anthony Ashley Cooper, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times: With a Collection of Letters* (Basil: J. J. Tourneisen and J. L. Legrand, 1790) <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=ien.35556007172828&view=2up&seq=306> [accessed 9 February 2021] pp. 294–297. Haithi Trust ebook.

[25] Pächt, *The Rise of Pictorial Narrative,* p. 1.

[26] Paul Barolsky, 'There Is No Such Thing as Narrative Art', *Arion,* 18 (2010), 49–62 <www.jstor.org/stable/27896816> [accessed 9 February 2021] (p. 49).

[27] Werner Wolf, 'Pictorial Narrativity', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. by David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 431–435 (pp. 431–33).

In terms of preaching, the influence of Lessing and Shaftesbury is seen in Lowry's *The Homiletical Beat.* Lowry reiterates the gulf between arts of space and arts of time, he links the sermon to 'temporal arts functioning in time' rather than 'visible designs set in space'. Lowry is adamant, and quotes H. Grady Davis who said, 'If we wish to learn from other arts, we must learn from these arts based on time sequence.'[28]

3.4 Monoscenic art, a defence

Klaus Speidel points out that there is a long history of single still pictures being received as narrative. He accepts that a picture does not become narrative just because viewers create a narrative from it or because it is based on a narrative, both of these features are external. However, he asks whether people could really have been wrong for centuries in thinking that pictures tell stories, even if they do not fulfil all the criteria for narrative. Intuition seems to rebel against denying pictures narrativity. Various arguments are used to defend monoscenic art's narrativity. Speidel notes that these focus on two inter-related areas: the way art is perceived, and the way art represents time. [29]

Horváth sees Lessing's view of the single, pregnant moment as unnecessarily restrictive and describes his division between arts of time and arts of space as imposed rather than natural. Lessing was often referring to sculpture rather than painting and he was discussing what was appropriate, rather than the actual potential of both art and text.[30] Speidel suggests that convention and entrenchment played a role in downplaying monoscenic art's narrativity. A convention that painting *should* only show a single moment became entrenched so that it appeared that painting *could* only show a single moment.[31]

Ernst Gombrich argued that this entire question about monoscenic art showing one point in time is false, even the idea of a point of time is misleading because there is no instant in perception. Every moment is informed by the ones

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[28] Lowry, *The Homiletical Beat*, pp. 2–3, 8, 46.
[29] Klaus Speidel, 'Can a Single Still Picture Tell a Story? Definitions of Narrative and the Alleged Problem of Time with Single Still Pictures', *Diegesis,* 2.1 (2013), 173–94 <https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/view/128/159> [accessed 9 February 2021] (pp. 173–74, 179-180).
[30] Gyöngyvér Horváth, 'Being Decent or Being Potent: Paradoxes in Limitations in Lessing's Laocoon', in *Art and Time: Proceedings of the IV Mediterranean Congress of Aesthetics* ed. by Kaled Alhamzah (Irbid: Yarmouk University, 2009), pp. 1–9 <https://www.academia.edu/2086791/Being_Decent_or_Being_Potent_Paradoxes_in_Limitations_in_Lessing_s_Laoco%C3%B6n_2009> [accessed 9 February 2021] (pp. 2–4,7–8).
[31] Speidel, 'Can a Single Still Picture Tell a Story?', p. 185.

before and anticipates the ones that follow. A single moment is difficult to achieve even with a film still and human beings are not cameras, we perceive rather slowly. After we have seen or heard something, both light and sound linger for a while and there is a form of 'immediate memory', a 'primary retention' before perception is stored or lost. We experience this when listening to someone and losing concentration for a moment; we can reach back into the immediate memory and retrieve what we missed. The mind also reaches into the future, not just as long-term expectation but more immediately. When reciting one line of text we are getting ready for the next. The future as well as the past is, to a degree, present in our minds.[32]

Monoscenic art is perceived as being comprehended 'at a glance', as a whole, whereas text is read successively, one sentence after another. Text accords with the events of a story that happen in sequence, but art is perceived holistically. Lew Andrews agrees that an artwork may initially be perceived as a whole, creating a first impression, but viewers then scan paintings section by section. The initial overall impression acts as a frame into which viewers assemble the parts.[33] Artists sometimes add details to prolong this second stage.

Despite the work of scholars such as Gombrich and Lew Andrews, this 'at a glance' view influences preaching. Lowry describes the sermon as existing in a 'wholly different category' to painting. He puts sermons in the same category as films, music and drama. He insists that, 'Presentations whose form is lined out *moment by moment* are narrative by definition. Presentations whose form occurs *all at once* are not.'[34] The argument seems obvious; how can art narrate successive events when it has no successive time indicators such as 'before' or 'after'? A closer look reveals the situation to be more complex. Speidel suggests that art has its own time conventions and there are clues in art that tell the viewer that the events represented in the picture have succeeded each other in time. Pictures may not be able to say 'before' or 'after', but they do have ways of showing a change of state that indicates time passing. Art may be less precise than language, but people do not

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[32] E. H. Gombrich, 'Moment and Movement in Art', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes,* 27 (1964), 293–306 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/750521?seq=1> [accessed 9 February 2021] (pp. 297–300).

[33] Lew Andrews, *Story and Space in Renaissance Art: The Rebirth of Continuous Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 48–53.

[34] Lowry, *The Homiletical Beat*, pp. 1–3.

need precision to show temporality. The knowledge gained through everyday experience is reliable enough for viewers to work out temporal order in paintings.[35]

The absolute nature of Lessing's dichotomy is contested and a strict division between word and image is refuted by some modern linguists. W. J. T. Mitchell observes that the assumptions that undergird the separation of the verbal and visual are being undermined. He does not deny differences, but the differences are not as straightforward as they appear. Language is not just sequential; it has spatial and painterly qualities. There is also no 'pure' image, without some of the elements associated with language and narrativity, Mitchell describes pure forms as a utopian ideal that is impossible to achieve, most forms are mixed.[36] Both painting and literature are arts of time and space but with different emphases.

Another argument against monoscenic art being able to narrate is its descriptive quality. In literature description is categorized as a pause in action. However, Lorenzo Pericolo notes that description may be a pause in action, but it is not a pause in narrativity. Narration is more than action. Pericolo observes that in monoscenic art the descriptive nature of art does not invalidate narration. It could be described as active description. Caravaggio, in his *Supper at Emmaus*, shows what appears to be one moment in time, a moment of recognition and insight, but invites us to think about the before and after by the dynamic nature of the 'instant' depicted. Actions that take place over time are 'folded' into a single image. Deliberate polyvalence in expression and gesture can encompass much story-time.[37] Lew Andrews denies that painting is arrested movement. Renaissance artists were concerned with showing the passage of time through movement both in individual figures and as movement flowing between people.[38] The figures in Giotto's frescos may literally be static but they are painted in such a way that the viewer feels the movement; Belting describes this as 'kinetic quality'.[39]

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[35] Speidel, 'Can a Single Still Picture Tell a Story?', pp. 180–182.
[36] W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 6.3 (1980), 539–567 <www.jstor.org/stable/1343108> [accessed 9 February 2021] (p. 541).
W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 3–4, 96.
[37] Lorenzo Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative: Dislocating the Istoria in Early Modern Painting* (London: Harvey Miller, 2011), pp. 5–7, 31, 73, 77. Caravaggio, *The Supper at Emmaus*, 1601, oil on canvas 141 × 196.2 cm, The National Gallery, London <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/michelangelo-merisi-da-caravaggio-the-supper-at-emmaus> [accessed 9 February 2021].
[38] Lew Andrews, *Story and Space,* pp. 25–26.
[39] Belting, 'The New Role of Narrative', 151–68 (p. 153).

Pericolo observes that perceiving movement is a matter of deduction on the viewer's part as the painter's illusion of movement triggers the process by which the image is set in motion in the viewer's mind. Time can be built into art if viewers are able to complete the actions in the painting using their knowledge of actions and the text on which the artwork is based. In Poussin's *Israelites Gathering Manna,* each person in the painting has one significant action: hunger, provision, eating and reverence, which reflects different stages of the narrative in one image. As with written narratives, artists can include analeptic and proleptic effects using visual referents. Mary Magdalen is often depicted with a jar in resurrection paintings, which refers to the earlier anointing of Jesus (Luke 7. 36–50) traditionally associated with her.[40] James Elkins has explored ways in which artists include time passing in paintings. Time can be expressed in the movement and gestures of people and in the natural world in shooting stars and waterfalls. Time can be symbolized by people of different ages, gravestones, clocks, ancient mountains and seasons. Crucially, for Elkins, the main way to place time in art is through presenting a narrative.[41]

In monoscenic art, biblical stories become visual narrative by means of what Jack Greenstein calls 'virtual emplotment'. This draws on the viewers' ability to recognize cause and effect without it being shown. It shows characters involved in situations that embody previous decisions that will result in future actions. Viewers may be shown neither the decision nor the resulting action. Paintings of the circumcision of Christ only show a knife. The viewer understands the earlier decision of Mary and Joseph to fulfil the law and knows the ritual that will follow. In this way time is understood as 'folded' into the composition.[42] It is as if the whole story is written on a large piece of translucent paper and folded many times until only one small rectangle of print is left showing, but the rest of the story is partly visible. The artist decides what piece of the story is left showing but there is still an imprint of past and future.

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[40] Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, pp. 79–80, 89–90, 101. Nicolas Poussin, *The Israelites Gathering the Manna in the Desert*, 1637–1639, oil on canvas, 149 × 200 cm, Louvre, Paris <https://www.nicolas-poussin.com/en/works/manna-desert> [accessed 9 February 2021].
[41] James Elkins, *Time and Narrative* (chapter of unpublished work) <https://www.academia.edu/165600/The_Visual_chapter_on_Time_and_Narrative_> [accessed 9 February 2021] (pp. 8–3–4, 9, 17–20, 23–25).
[42] Jack M. Greenstein, *Mantegna and Painting as Historical Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 150–52.

3.5 Challenges to synoptic and simultaneous art's ability to narrate

The more mobile storytelling of synoptic and simultaneous art does not meet Alberti's 'open window' criteria as more than one scene is presented in a single frame. In synoptic art the scenes are seldom in narrative order; in simultaneous art the scenes within a frame are from two different stories often separated in both time and geography. Simultaneous artworks provoke less criticism than synoptic art as they can be perceived as two monoscenic works that are linked, with the viewer mediating on the association. If they are viewed in this way, they attract similar criticism to monoscenic art.

Barolsky maintains that any spatial art evoking a story that moves through time, must take liberties with its temporal structure to some degree. His main criticism is aimed at synoptic art, and he is correct, artists who work in this style do take liberties with the temporal structure.[43] This narrative disorder prompted Ann McNamara and her team to look at ways of using computer techniques to direct the gaze of viewers to the original narrative order, as people are no longer familiar with the biblical stories.[44] However, in gaining the temporal order, much may be lost; the artist may have rearranged the episodes for a reason. Barolsky highlights the different concerns of artists and writers; the artist's first concern is not narration but the harmony of composition, placing objects and people within the illusion of space that the painter creates. This creates a conflict between composition and narrative order. Barolsky uses Ghiberti's *Jacob and Esau* from his *Gates of Paradise* to make his point.

This relief has seven episodes from the story of Jacob and Esau, arranged in no discernible order: some are in high relief, some low; some are large, others small; some are in full view, others partially hidden. Barolsky notes the disparity between the harmonious pictorial composition and the radical disordering of the storyline. He maintains that the image evokes a story and causes the viewer to narrate to themselves, but the image does not narrate. The image may even discourage comprehending the story as a whole by calling viewers' attention to composition rather than the biblical narrative. For Barolsky the harmony of the overall composition is 'at the expense of' the ordered, temporal sequence of the narrative. In one sense Barolsky is right. Ghiberti includes a group of women who are not in the

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[43] Barolsky, 'There Is No Such Thing as Narrative Art', pp. 49–50.

[44] Ann McNamara, and others, 'Directing Gaze in Narrative Art', in *SAP'12*: *Proceedings of the ACM Symposium on Applied Perception* (Los Angeles: Association for Computing Machinery, 2012), 63–70 <https://doi.org/10.1145/2338676.2338689>.

biblical account and puts these in high relief, nearest the viewer, whereas Esau selling his birth right (an important biblical episode) is in low relief and barely visible.[45]

Lorenzo Ghiberti, *The Gates of Paradise: Jacob and Esau*, 1425–1452. A synoptic composition Photograph by Yair Haklai, Creative Commons Attribution-share Alike 4.0 International License. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en

3.6 Synoptic and simultaneous art, a defence

The main argument put forward against synoptic art narrating is the way it disorders the story's order of occurrence in its order of presentation. Nelson Goodman observes that both film and literature would be severely restricted if they had to narrate in the order of occurrence. This is particularly true of Modernist and Post-Modernist literature. It is not only art that distorts the order; preaching does not always follow the order of occurrence. The difference between art disordering text and preaching disordering text is that when art narrates it cannot use words such as

[45] Barolsky, 'There Is No Such Thing as Narrative Art', pp. 50–55.

'before' and 'then' to give direction. Despite this, Goodman maintains that many artworks can stand reordering without ceasing to be narrative.[46]

Artists can, to a certain degree, guide the viewer's order of 'reading', thereby overcoming some of the disorder; elements such a colour and light can direct the eye. Speidel also notes how artists can determine the order of reading by hiding things they want viewers to see last. Sometimes the last item is significant and causes viewers to rethink the story. An example of this technique is Bruegel's 'hiding' of Icarus in his painting on that subject. Without the title most people would miss Icarus drowning and the dead man in the bushes.[47] Viewers admire the pastoral scene and it is only with close inspection that they discover its darker side. The pretty landscape becomes a place of callous indifference to suffering and, by the initial admiration of it, the viewer is implicated in that indifference. Art may guide the viewer, but participation and engagement is still required. The viewer is invited to deliberate on meaning.

It could be that the doubts surrounding synoptic art's ability to narrate are based on using wrong standards to judge narrative art. Speidel points out that our present culture's difficulty with synoptic narrative arises from the use of photographic conventions to judge paintings. Photographs are closer to Lessing's single moment and people are familiar with this form but unfamiliar with forms that show different moments in the same scene. In earlier ages there were different expectations, if viewers saw the same person several times in the same space, they assumed different moments in time. If they saw someone portrayed as alive and then dead, precise time was not needed, 'later' was good enough.[48]

Barolsky's objections to visual narrative, particularly synoptic narrative, rest on certain assumptions. He seems to assume that the main aim of narrative art is to tell the story as a sequence of events. He complains that the episodes are not placed in an 'obviously identifiable sequence' and there is no obvious allusion to narrative. Although art's teaching role may indicate communicating the story as an important aim, art's other narrative purposes could modify this and explain the more complex visual narrations that Barolsky describes as 'going against the grain' of the narrative

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[46] Nelson Goodman, 'Twisted Tales or Story, Study, and Symphony', *Synthese,* 46 (1981), 331–49 <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01130045> (pp. 331–32, 347–49).
[47] Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, *c.*1555, oil on canvas, 73 × 112cm, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels <http://www.pieterbruegel.org/landscape-with-the-fall-of-icarus/> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[48] Speidel, 'Can a Single Still Picture Tell a Story?', 173–94 (pp. 184–86).

order.[49] Meaning, significance, emotional engagement and contemplation are other purposes that may decide the ordering. Synoptic and simultaneous art can also reflect the complexity of biblical narratives, an example of this is seen in Judges where Joshua appears to die twice (Judges 1:1 and 2:8) but it is a flashback to help with the interpretation of the text that follows. The Markan 'sandwiches' are another example of complex narration. Mark splits a text by interpolating a different text in the middle and the stories often interpret each other, Mark 5:21-43 is one such case. James Edward sees this literary technique as theological in purpose with the centre narrative providing the interpretive key and highlighting major motifs.[50]

Choosing to visually tell stories using monoscenic, synoptic or simultaneous forms, exposed artists to the criticism of not really narrating. If recounting the story was the main purpose there was a simple solution, use sequential or continuous art. Despite these options being open to them, many artists continued to use synoptic and simultaneous art, which may indicate that artists' main aim was other than communicating the storyline. Barolsky sees artists' primary concern as creating a harmonious composition that is 'complex and subtle' but fails to tell the story. Artists are reduced to translators of stories into 'something other than story', that prompts viewers to recall the original narrative.[51] This view presents artists with a stark alternative: succeed as an artist in creating beautiful compositions or succeed as a visual narrator by producing straightforward sequential or continuous art.

Alistair Fowler drew attention to the fact that the one-point perspective of Alberti was not the choice of every major Renaissance artist. He posits the idea that it may have proved too restrictive for artists, curtailing how they painted narratives.[52] If artists were continuing to choose difficult narrative forms, going against the flow of the Renaissance push for realism in art, they were being driven by purposes far more demanding than just telling the story. Artists strove for significance, meaning and emotional and spiritual engagement. These purposes are reflected in sophisticated compositions and viewing orders. Elkins talks of complex possibilities for visual narrative developed during the Renaissance. There are various orders: order of occurrence in the source, order of telling and order of reading. Different

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[49] Barolsky, 'There Is No Such Thing as Narrative Art', pp. 50, 56.
[50] James R. Edwards, 'Markan Sandwiches: The Significance of Interpolations in Markan Narratives', *Novum Testamentum,* 31. 3 (1989), 193–216 <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853689X00207> (pp. 196, 200, 205, 216).
[51] Barolsky, 'There Is No Such Thing as Narrative Art', pp. 56–57, 60.
[52] Alastair Fowler, *Renaissance Realism: Narrative Images in Literature and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 8, 20.

types of reading are needed, which calls for flexibility on the part of the viewer. Elkins endorses the view that the complexity of Renaissance art reflected textual complexity already ‘well developed in written narratives’.[53] Narrative criticism has also made people aware of the sophistication of biblical narratives.

Synoptic visual narration is not tearing the story apart but rearranging it to explore its depth. Monoscenic art is not static but a form where time is ‘folded’, and the viewer can unfold the narrative by close attention over a period of time. Art works were not glanced in museums and galleries on the occasional visit but seen every Sunday in church or everyday if they were in private hands. Visual narrative does not have to be ‘at the expense of’ the story, it can enrich the story by its own form of complex narration. It is narration that demands committed participation by the viewer and an invitation to dialogue with the artist concerning meaning. This may seem a long way from preaching, but a deeper understanding of how these styles of art function can help preachers in rethinking how they preach in a revelatory style.

3.7 A different understanding of time

Both monoscenic and synoptic art’s narrativity depend on a different perception of time. Greenstein observes that Renaissance writers shared a sense of time that was both relative and polyvalent, rather than absolute. There was chronological time in which human actions occurred, this was time as past, present and future, time in sequence. There was also the quality of time. Greenstein observes that multiple time frames can occur within the same painting; there may be personal time showing what is being experienced by a person or group and alongside this there may be other ‘times’, which could be natural (a season), social (a celebration) or historical time. There are also epochs of time and religious time. An event can exist in a number of ‘times’; it is the significance of the times that shapes the way events relate, not just chronological order.[54]

None of this is new, for the Bible has concepts of quantitative and qualitative time, John Marsh defines this as chronological time and time as opportunity. Marsh linked these concepts to the New Testament Greek terms *chronos* and *kairos*, just two of the words the Bible uses for time. Chronos was broadly time measured, the quantity of time, duration; kairos was the content of time, appropriate time, the right

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[53] James Elkins, ‘On the Impossibility of Stories: The Anti-Narrative and Non-Narrative Impulse in Modern Painting’, *Word & Image,* 7 (1991), 348–364 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02666286.1991.10435883> (pp. 350–52).
[54] Greenstein, *Mantegna,* pp. 70–79.

time, opportune time, the quality of time. The role of the prophets was to interpret the times and in the New Testament we see the time fulfilled in the coming of Jesus (Matthew 16:2–3). [55]

John E. Smith relates kairos to the 'special position an event or action occupies'. Kairos points to the significance of events. Kairos in English may be rendered 'timing' as when someone's timing is right. Questions of duration relate to chronos, time measured. Smith underscores the interdependency of these two terms, kairos depends on chronos to supply the temporal framework within which judgements (kairos) are made. Chronos and kairos interact. [56]

In the Bible both kairos and chronos are used in the way Marsh and Smith suggest. Luke refers to the devil leaving Jesus until an 'opportune time' (Luke 4:13) and Ephesians refers to the 'fulness of time' (Ephesians 1:10), both of which are rendered by the term kairos. In Matthew's gospel Herod asks the Magi 'the exact time when the star had appeared' (Matthew 2:7) and Luke speaks of the 'long time' the Gerasene demoniac had been troubled (Luke 8:27). Both are expressions of chronos. Both concepts of time are present in the Old Testament but Hebrew has many words for time. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, chronos was sometimes used for duration of time as in Ezra 4:15 that talks of 'from very old time', whereas the writer of Ecclesiastes speaks of 'a time to weep, and a time to laugh' (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8), which is qualitative time, and the Greek version (the Septuagint) uses the word kairos throughout this passage to translate time in the sense of season.[57]

The precision of correlating these two concepts of time to the words chronos and kairos was challenged by James Barr. He drew attention to the times when the words are used interchangeably or used together with little difference between them (Acts 1:7; I Thessalonians 5:1). The Bible does not always distinguish between chronological time and significant time, one often implies the other. Usage was flexible. Having said this, Barr does concede that when a season is indicated or when the sense is of the proper time, kairos is often but not exclusively used (Mark 11:13).

[55] John Marsh, *In the Fulness of Time* (London: Nisbet, 1952), pp.19-25,
[56] John E. Smith, 'Time, Times and the Right Time: Chronos and Kairos', *The Monist*, 53.1 (1969), 1-13 <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist196953115> (pp. 1–6, 8–9).
[57] *Interlinear Greek English Septuagint Old Testament (LXX*)
<https://archive.org/details/InterlinearGreekEnglishSeptuagintOldTestamentPrint/mode/2up>
[accessed 9 February 2021].

When adjectives of quantity are indicated chronos is typically but not exclusively used (Matthew 25:19).[58]

The prophets judged the nations on the quality of the time. Amos saw his time as one of injustice. He links what was happening socially and economically to religiously significant events (the Exodus and the Day of the Lord) that are wide apart chronologically but pertinent to the time (Amos 2:10, 5:18–24). Art like the Bible expresses different types of time. Narrativity can only be denied to art on the basis of not being able to show time if a narrow view of time is used. If the early chapters of Amos were translated into a painting it would be a simultaneous composition showing situations of injustice with an image of the Exodus and the Day of the Lord incorporated; past, present and future in one unified image.

Jocelyn Small notes that the ancient Greeks believed that the spirit of something could be more significant than formal accuracy, as a result they did not prioritize strict chronology. Images could be arranged in order of importance to the artists, which often meant they were placed in a commanding position. Small likens such arrangements to newspaper front page headlines, where position is given according to significance rather than chronology; Small calls this ‘hierarchical time’.[59] Something similar is present in Renaissance art, a period that was strongly influenced by classical ideas. Ghiberti may dismember the narrative chronologically, but he puts it together according to different temporal qualities. It is up to the viewer to make the connections.

Despite Alberti’s emphasis on realism, artists often show scenes that could in no way be seen through a window. They combine times by placing a past event in a contemporary scene, showing the relevance of the past to the present. Deliberate anachronism adds to the feeling that there is a religious link between time past and time present that overrides chronology. The deliberate conjunction of the biblical and the contemporary creates what could be called a ‘devotional present’ signalling the relevance of biblical narrative. Time is collapsed to give a religiously unified time frame but not a unified chronological one.

To understand time in art, viewers need to learn new conventions. As Speidel argues, to insist that a painting can only show one moment would be like saying that sentences in Mandarin Chinese are always referring to the present as it does not have

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[58] James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, rev. edn, Studies in Biblical Theology Series 1 (London: SCM Press, 1969), pp. 21–26, 33, 40–46.

[59] Jocelyn Penny Small, ‘Time in Space: Narrative in Classical Art’, *Art Bulletin,* 81.4 (1999), 562–575 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3051334?seq=1> [accessed 10 February 2021] (pp. 562–66).

a past and future tense. Mandarin Chinese has its own ways of indicating time that are as ‘natural’ as English conventions. Art, too, has its own ways of communicating the passage of time.[60]

3.8 Active engagement

Narrative art is not about passively being told or shown a story, it is an invitation to narrative engagement. If artists wanted to engage viewers in a participatory narrative event, then opting for synoptic, simultaneous and monoscenic narrative forms makes sense. The participation involved could be cognitive, affective and contemplative. The viewer is an active participant whose knowledge of the text is part of the activity, but not the whole. Cognitively the viewer can engage with both image and text, allowing them to interact. The viewer initially sees an image as a whole, then the eye is free to roam and make connections, suggesting a range of temporal orders. However, the artist may guide the eye by line, colour, composition, light, size and other factors. If the artist is the only active agent and the viewer is passive, then the faith of the artist becomes particularly significant; if the viewer is active and engages with an artist’s interpretation then the faith of the artist is not the only consideration. There is a two-way interaction and conversation.

As Barolsky suggests, in Ghiberti’s relief of Jacob and Esau, viewers can connect the figures in many ways; people may connect the sections in deep relief, or link those under the arches. The relationships can be explored horizontally, vertically or diagonally. In the Jacob and Esau relief the telling might move vertically downward on the righthand side, moving from Rebekah listening to God, to Rebekah plotting with Jacob and finally to her watching the act of deception.[61] The first image evokes the Rebekah who was a woman of faith (Genesis 24, 25: 22–23) and the image portrays the moment when she listens to God who tells her that the younger son will take precedence over the older twin. The second and third images fast-forwards to an older Rebekah who is now prepared to deceive her blind husband to make the promise come true for her favoured, younger son. Connecting the images invites a question, ‘What happened to Rebekah to create this change?’ Moving around the other episodes the viewer completes the story with more emphasis on understanding a character and the insight involved rather than just getting the episodes in the ‘right’ order.

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[60] Speidel, ‘Can a Single Still Picture Tell a Story?’, pp. 185–86.
[61] Barolsky, ‘There Is No Such Thing as Narrative Art’, p. 59.

Ghiberti's interpolation of a group of women into the visual narration does not have to be a distraction as Barolsky suggests, it can be the artist's way of provoking thought. Barolsky refers to these women as Rebekah's birth attendants.[62] If this is so they are remarkably inattentive. They stand outside the architectural space with their shopping and gossip among themselves, they do not even make eye contact with Rebekah, who sits small and alone in her bed, depicted in extremely low relief. Whoever these women are, they are talking. Would not people talk about Rebekah's family? They were not exactly a model of harmony. This very fact makes this synoptic narrative particularly appropriate for this story. Barolsky complains that the story is disordered, but so was the family.

Visual narration was a participatory, devotional medium in the Renaissance and earlier. Artists were free to rearrange biblical stories as most people would know the basic storyline. Part of the religious culture of the time was to use the imagination to reflect on biblical stories. Devotional books such as *The Garden of Prayer* (1454) encouraged people to engage with biblical stories by imagining the story in their local setting, populated by people they knew as biblical characters. Michael Baxendall describes the artist as a professional visualizer of stories but viewers were amateurs in the same discipline; this meant art became a place of negotiation between two visualizers.[63] The text had already become spatial in people's minds by using contemplative techniques and time had already moved from strict chronology. Artists did the same, populating biblical artworks with contemporary people and places.

Looking at images is an active process. Lubbock notes that the viewer has to interpret and supply the relationships within each picture or between pictures. The relationships may be implied by juxtaposition as well as the temporal sequence; the relationship could be cause and effect, contrast, similarity or negation. All the verbal conjunctions have to be reconstructed by the viewer, though the artist can give some direction in the way different parts are linked.

Monoscenic, simultaneous and synoptic art make demands of the viewer, there is no passive gazing, there is instead an invitation to a narrative event. The role of the viewer may answer many of the doubts concerning the narrative status of monoscenic, synoptic and simultaneous art. The art is not just activating memories of

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[62] Barolsky, 'There Is No Such Thing as Narrative Art', pp. 52, 54.
[63] Michael Baxandall, *Painting & Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 46–48.

stories, the artwork is engaging the viewer in negotiations concerning meaning. Elkins posits two ways of reading: there is deductive reading and associative reading. It is the difference between treating a narrative as a puzzle to be solved by analysing it (the approach Barolsky seems to take) or meditating on it allowing associations to be formed in different ways. Elkins describes associative reading as liturgical and religious, linking to Christian themes, types and antitypes, thereby encouraging viewers to meditate on general Christian truths not just the original story.[64] John Dury also describes two types of looking: an analytical looking that is about separating and examining the parts and a second type of viewing, which takes in the whole and its elements and how they communicate.[65]

It may be that few biblical narrative paintings are straightforward storytelling. As Lubbock observed, even apparently sequential images do not always follow an obvious temporal order, they can often be read in different orders allowing a range of connections to be made and themes to emerge. The dominant order may be chronological but there are other patterns that link the individual stories.[66]

3.9 Narrative art and the revelatory plot

It may be demonstrated that monoscenic, synoptic and simultaneous artworks narrate, but that is not enough to make them a source and model for the revelatory plot. It remains to be shown whether they narrate in a revelatory manner. Are enough of the characteristics of the revelatory plot present to affirm their revelatory status? The following analysis considers the characteristics of these styles of art alongside those of the revelatory plot.

By their nature, monoscenic artworks have a reduced emphasis on action and an increased emphasis on character and insight. Artemisia Gentileschi's image of Judith beheading Holofernes depicts a woman who is strong both physically and in personality.[67] Synoptic artworks can also reveal character by connecting scenes non-chronologically, forcing the viewer to consider the character in the light of the new relationships.

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[64] Elkins, 'On the Impossibility of Stories', pp. 354–55, 358–59.

[65] John Dury, *Painting the Word: Christian Pictures and Their Meanings* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with National Gallery Publications, 1999), p. 18.

[66] Lubbock, *Storytelling in Christian Art,* pp. 81–83.

[67] Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, *c.*1620, oil on canvas, 146.5 × 108 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/judith-beheading-holofernes> [accessed 9 February 2021].

Art can manifest a moment of insight, as in Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus*, it can also bring insights. Insights come in and through the material, as artists have to translate narratives into bodies, objects and settings. Art is an embodied form. Narrative artworks depict the specific and the concrete, in which people come to understand the universal and abstract. The concave shape of Adam and the convex shape of God in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* and his use of links and gaps speaks not just of Adam's creation but expresses the insight that humanity both relates to God but is separate.[68] Simultaneous artworks bring insight by juxtaposing different stories.

Art displays and shows by its nature. It can lay bare a scene from a narrative showing a slice of life in detail. Degas' *Absinth Drinker* shows despair and hopelessness that goes beyond the situation of the woman in the café. The artist has shown depression in a way that speaks across generations, an instance of relevance through recognition and identification.[69] Atmosphere, tension and pace can be expressed artistically. Art can also create a slow, contemplative experience; Memling's *Scenes from the Passion of Christ* invites contemplation on the different episodes.[70] Artistic works can have tension, but it is emotional rather than teleogenic.

Visual narrative has a scenic quality and scenes often have interpretive value for understanding the whole narrative. In Turner's *Fifth Plague of Egypt* the swirling heavens above the pyramid help the viewer to interpret the narrative as a contest between Pharaoh and God not Pharaoh and Moses.[71] Synoptic art communicates by creating non-linear relationships between scenes, emphasising some scenes more than others. Masaccio places Christ commanding Peter in the centre foreground in his *Tribute Money,* the other scenes are less pronounced.[72]

In art, causation is often implied rather than stated; as in revelatory works, juxtaposition, contrast and association are important. In Georgia O'Keefe's *Black Cross New Mexico,* the contrast between the dominance of the black cross and the

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[68] Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, 1510, fresco, 2.80 × 5.70m, The Sistine Chapel Vatican City <https://www.michelangelo.org/the-creation-of-adam.jsp> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[69] Edgar Degas, *The Absinthe Drinker*, 1875–1876, oil on canvas, 92 × 68.5 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire_id/in-a-cafe-2234.html> [accessed 9 February 2021].

[70] Hans Memling, *Scenes from the Passion of Christ,* 1470–1471, oil on oak, 56.7 × 92.2 cm, Galleria Sabauda, Turin <https://www.artbible.info/art/large/ 351.html> [accessed 9 February 2021].

[71] J. M. W. Turner, *The Fifth Plague of Egypt*, 1800, oil on canvas, 121.9 × 182.8 cm, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/jmw-turner-the-fifth-plague-of-egypt> [accessed 9 February 2021].

[72] Masaccio, *The Tribute Money*, 1426–1427, fresco, 255 × 598 cm, Capella Brancacci, Stanta Maria del Carmine, Florence <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Tribute-Money> [accessed 9 February 2021].

subtler dawn is striking and it is the contrast that links the image of death and resurrection.[73] In synoptic art different causal connections can be made.

Time is treated creatively, particularly in simultaneous and synoptic art as these forms disrupt the time sequence. Horváth describes artists' use of anachronism as a narrative device that uses time imaginatively, it makes narratives seem 'actual, efficient and present'. Biblical stories are related to personal stories by anachronism; time in art can be 'layered'.[74] The way a scene is depicted can 'enfold' much of a narrative and even other narratives. Stanley Spencer's *The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus' Daughter* not only shows her rising but puts the story in a contemporary context (1947), making it part of the present story. He also puts it in the context of the great resurrection at the end of time bringing past, present and future together.[75]

As in revelatory works, artworks can express a degree of ambiguity and do not necessarily point to a single meaning. Monoscenic art has a primary focus on one scene and the viewer has the responsibility of unfolding the rest of the narrative and exploring meaning. Hendrick ter Brugghen's, *Jacob Reproaching Laban* shows only one scene but suggests much more of the narrative.[76] Simultaneous art is often susceptible to different interpretations. Velazquez' *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* has two scenes in a simultaneous presentation but leaves it up to the viewer how the two scenes relate.[77] This aspect of art makes viewing an interactive and ongoing process.

Paintings are often intertextual containing allusions to other narratives, creating multi-layered meaning and giving the image depth of communication. Nativity images often have references to Jesus' death in cross shapes, darkness, coffin-like mangers and a hint of thorn. Visual metaphors and symbols are an

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[73] Georgia O' Keefe, *Black Cross, New Mexico*, 1929, oil on Canvas, 99.1 × 76.2 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/46327/black-cross-new-mexico> [accessed 9 February 2021].

[74] Horváth Gyöngyvér, 'Rephrased, Relocated, Repainted: Visual Anachronism as a Narrative Device', *Image & Narrative*, 12.4 (2011), 4–17 <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/index.php/imagenarrative/article/view/181> [accessed 9 February 2021] (pp.15–16).

[75] Stanley Spencer, *The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus' Daughter*, 1947, oil on canvas 76.8 × 189 cm, Southampton City Art Gallery, Southampton <https://www.southamptoncityartgallery.com/object/sotag-1383/> [accessed 9 February 2021].

[76] Hendrick ter Brugghen, *Jacob Reproaching Laban for Giving him Leah in Place of Rachel*, 1627, oil on canvas, 97.5 × 114.3 cm, National Galley, London <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hendrick-ter-brugghen-jacob-reproaching-laban> [accessed 9 February 2021].

[77] Velázquez, *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, *c.*1618, oil on canvas, 63 × 103.5 cm, The National Gallery, London <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/diego-velazquez-christ-in-the-house-of-martha-and-mary> [accessed 9 February 2021].

important means of artistic communication; the sun in John August Swanson's *Psalm 85* speaks of a God whose face is turned towards the earth in blessing.[78]

Overall, monoscenic, synoptic and simultaneous art show many of the characteristics of the revelatory plot and narrate in complex ways that encourage participation and engagement in interpretation. Specifically, the embodied nature of these forms of art, their showing and invitational nature and relevance through anachronism manifest a revelatory style.

3.10 The Image of God

Can artists who may not self-identify as believers afford spiritual insights into biblical narratives? The key to this issue is Genesis 1:26–27 which talks of humanity made in God's image. The image of God is crucial not only in terms of artists but concerning the more general issue of the potential of learning of God or gaining spiritual insights from other human beings, whether they be the characters in a narrative or in contemporary life. Millard Erickson highlights the universality of the image, it is not limited, it is for all humankind. The Fall does not cancel the image, references to the image of God reoccur in Genesis 5:1–2, and Genesis 9:6, which are both Post-Fall. In the New Testament the word 'image' is rendered by the Greek word *eikon.* James 3:9 confirms this, describing humanity as being in the likeness (*homoiosis)* of God.[79]

The image of God is not obliterated by the Fall but it is affected by it, Cyril of Jerusalem uses the words 'crippled' 'lost' and 'blinded' to describe Post-Fall humanity.[80] Luther and Calvin describe Post-Fall humanity as 'corrupt', 'lost' 'maimed' and 'destroyed' but despite this, a remnant of the image remains.[81] If humanity still has something of the image of God does that suggest that knowledge

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[78] John August Swanson, *Psalm 85,* 2003, coloured inks, *c.*61 × 71 cm, Holy Cross Place, Los Angeles <http://www.johnaugustswanson.com/default.cfm/PID%3D1.2-16.html> [accessed 9 February 2021].

[79] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd edn (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), pp. 459–60, 469–70.

[80] Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis Lecture II.5* <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310102.htm> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[81] Martin Luther, *On the Creation: A Critical and Devotional Commentary of Genesis*, trans. by Henry Cole, rev. and ed. by John Nicholas Lenker (Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands,1904), <https://archive.org/details/LutherOnTheCreationACriticalAndDevotionalCommentaryOnGenesis1-3/mode/2up> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 115–16, 136, 340. Internet Archive ebook.
Calvin, John, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis,* trans. by Revd. John King, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847) <https://archive.org/details/commentarieson01calv/page/n3/mode/2up> [accessed 10 February 2021], I, pp. 94–95, 142–43. Internet Archive ebook.

of humans and knowledge of God are related? In knowing one is there the potential to know something of the other?

3.10.1 What is the image of God?

In one sense, what constitutes the image of God is not relevant as long as people retain something of that image. However, some understanding of what constitutes the image is relevant as a revelatory approach draws on human culture, thinking, creativity and relationships. Do these have potential to reflect God in any way as part of that image? Scripture is unclear about the constitution of the imago Dei and scholars differ. Erickson divides the different views into three groups: substantive, relational and functional. Substantive views identify the imago Dei as a characteristic or quality, the relational views regard it as an interaction and the functional view locates the imago Dei in what people do.[82]

In substantive views, reason was considered most like God by Augustine.[83] Aquinas also took this view, seeing the mind as best imaging God. Although he includes love as part of the image, ‘we are most perfectly in the image of God when we are knowing and loving God.’[84] Paul Ricoeur, although he thought the biblical term was indeterminate, located the imago Dei in free will, the ability to make moral choices.[85] Pope Benedict XVI defined it as ‘the capacity for relationship; it is the human capacity for God’.[86] The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge saw creative freedom as a reflection of the creator God.[87]

The relational view is espoused by many modern theologians, it is humanity in relationship with God. For Joel Green the image of God is ‘fundamentally relational or covenantal’, but his relational view incorporates some substantive and functional elements. He describes people in relationship with God and exercising a stewarding relationship with nature. He also describes humanity as having the *capacity* to make

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[82] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 460.
[83] Augustine, *On the Trinity* <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130112.htm> [accessed 10 February 2021], XII. 4, 7.
[84] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars* <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/1093.htm> [accessed 10 February 2021], Question 93. Article 4.
[85] Paul Ricoeur and George Gingras, ‘“The Image of God" and the Epic of Man’, *CrossCurrents,* 11.1 (1961), 37–50 <https://www-jstor-org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/stable/24456912> [accessed 10 February 2021] (p. 50).
[86] Benedict XVI, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, *Resourcement: Retrieval & Renewal in Catholic Thought,* trans. by Boniface Ramsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 45–48.
[87] Edmondson, ‘Coleridge and Preaching’, 75–94 (pp. 90–92). Bruce, 'The Vital Importance of the Imagination’, pp. 126–27.

decisions and take responsibility for them. For Joel Green the defining characteristic of these relationships is covenantal love.[88]

The functional view defines the image in terms of what humans do, particularly the exercise of dominion, usually expressed as stewardship in light of the way dominion is understood in the Bible. Dominion was not unbridled power; Hebrew kings were expected to exercise power to benefit the people (Psalm 72); they were princes under God. Erickson includes work and learning in the functional view as part of the exercise of dominion.[89]

3.10.2 Problems and possibilities

Erickson contends that no view of the imago Dei is without difficulties. Reason as the image fails in terms of being universal and invariable, for intellect varies in individuals and other capacities would be open to the same criticism. There is a connection between image and dominion but they are not equated, dominion could be the result of the image rather than its definition. Initially, it is difficult to see how the relational view is universal, as not everyone is in relationship with God, unless, like Emil Brunner, the relationship is defined in terms of humanity standing before God in a more rudimentary sense.[90] However, the relational view could be deemed to be universal if relationship is understood as a gift. The relationship is gifted to humanity by God; God is in relationship with every human being and there is a narrative of that relationship through creation, redemption, and God's interaction with the world. The relationship may not be reciprocal, but it can still exist.

Scripture never identifies what constitutes the image, but it seems to be integral to being human as a whole rather than a single attribute. Erickson sees it as something people are, not something they possess.[91] Being in the image of God could be expressed in relationships and activities such as creativity, stewardship and learning. Being made in the image of God confers dignity on all human beings and this means that good acts can be performed by people who do not claim belief in God. Human doing, thinking, being, relating and creativity as aspects of the image of God means that preachers can draw on the work of artists, thinkers and others who do not necessarily identify as believers or whose concerns may be other than religious. Wisdom needs to be used concerning who or what a preacher draws on.

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[88] Joel Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, pp. 62–64.
[89] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 473.
[90] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pp. 468–73.
[91] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pp. 470–71.

Seeing creativity as part of the imago Dei means preachers can exercise that gift with confidence but never forgetting that all human faculties are fallen and in need of redemption.

3.10.3 Jesus the image of God

A fully human Jesus in whom the image of God is undamaged by sin (II Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3) was crucial in defending the legitimacy of art in the early centuries of Christianity. John of Damascus asserted that matter was not to be despised as Christ took on flesh. 'When the Invisible One becomes visible to flesh, you may then draw a likeness of His form […] Give to it all the endurance of engraving and colour.'[92] Richard Viladesau notes that the arguments in favour of depicting Jesus were rooted in the incarnation and humanity made in the image of God. In honouring God's image in people God is honoured.[93] Bruce sees it as the preacher's role to enable the congregation to see God speaking in and through people.[94] This view of both Jesus and humanity allowed artists to portray people with dignity even if they were not engaged in overtly 'spiritual' activities.

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the claim that monoscenic, synoptic and simultaneous art can be models for a revelatory approach to preaching and may be significant sources of the revelatory plot. It also sought to establish three forms of art which have an invitational nature with relevance that is integral to the style by showing ways in which artists encouraged identification and triggered recognition by the use of anachronism, placing biblical scenes and people in contemporary dress and settings. The participatory nature of art was explored in the way that art encourages engagement and negotiation of meaning with the artist. This chapter has traced some of the thinking concerning the ability of art to narrate and ways in which it may do that, particularly in reference to revelatory narration. The denial of narrative ability to art stems from an implicit ideal that the main role of art is to communicate the storyline in a sequential manner. Against such an ideal, the majority of art fails; art

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[92] John of Damascus, *Apologia Against Those Who Decry Holy Images* <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/johndamascus-images.asp> [accessed 10 February 2021], PART 1, para 9.

[93] Richard Viladesau, 'Aesthetics and Religion', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, ed. by Frank Burch Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 25–43 (pp. 32–33).

[94] Bruce, 'The Vital Importance of the Imagination', pp. 145.

needs to be judged by its own criteria. Many of the criticisms levelled at monoscenic, synoptic or simultaneous art have an element of truth, but none are potent enough to deny these styles of art narrativity on their own terms.

The image of God in all humanity has been put forward as a way of learning from people who may not share the Christian faith; the Fall may have damaged the image of God in humanity but it is not obliterated. Preachers can learn from artists even if an artist does not claim religious belief. Much is gained with visual narration in terms of teaching, a contemplative approach, creative presentation and exposition of the text as part of art's interpretive strategies.

The following chapter shows how art can be integrated into sermons in a variety of ways, drawing on its content, techniques and styles. Chapter four translates key characteristics of the revelatory plot into a practical sermon form. This is not a replacement for the resolution plot, neither is it meant to be applied to all texts. The revelatory style is particularly appropriate for narrative texts.

Chapter Four
The Revelatory Plot and Sermon Form

This chapter aims to develop a model for preaching in a revelatory style, drawing on three major characteristics of the revelatory plot: character, insight and laying bare/showing. The intention is to create a model that is earthed in the realities reflected in biblical narratives, which is rooted in scholarship, and where insights are embodied in people, situations and things that can be sensed in some way. The result is an incarnational style of preaching. This model integrates art and seeks to demonstrate how art can contribute to a sermon at every stage. The overall objective is to give preachers a practical way of preparing sermons that display narrative realities with the possibility of embodied people and situations speaking across generations. It aims to earth this in the theology of the incarnation showing that the things of this world can have spiritual significance.

The early location of this chapter means that the practice demonstrated in this section poses questions for various disciplines in the rest of this thesis. This draws on practical theology's contextual nature as noted in the introduction. Practical theology allows issues to arise from practice rather than theory being applied to practice.

The characteristics of the revelatory plot could suggest a range of sermon forms and not all characteristics have to be used. This thesis develops one form that highlights the three major characteristics of the revelatory plot named above. Another important characteristic — reduced closure — I cover in the section on ending the sermon. Other characteristics of the revelatory plot tend to follow or are included as appropriate for each sermon. I use extracts from my own sermons throughout this chapter as they were created using this process and it allows me to follow the process through from notes to delivery. I have put a selection of sermons created using this process on a website (www.preachpreach.com) and two are included in the appendix.

4.1 The process: creating a living text

The initial process is to turn the narrative into a living text. A living text is one that unfolds the Bible's often brief narratives into detailed lived realities: people, settings, textures, actions, smells, tastes, sounds and other narrative aspects available to the senses. This unfolding exposes the situation and the characters and explores the emotional, physical, social-economic, political and spiritual ramifications of the

circumstances. A living text is not an attempt to get behind the text to the author's world as that could be different to the reality reflected in the text, however, author direction in the form of stylistic and descriptive details and comments may indicate ways in which the narrative can be unfolded. Careful attention is paid to the characters as the process of creating a living text reveals characters in their setting and their relationships and takes account of what is happening to them as whole people. This helps congregants to relate to people in the biblical narratives, it is part of weaving relevance throughout the sermon.

The initial process starts with immersion in the text, but biblical narration is often highly compressed and this may cause people to overlook parts of the narrative. Compressed narration would not have been a problem for a biblical audience as many people shared a common culture and there would have been little need to fill in details. The same assumptions do not apply to a modern congregation. This means that condensed biblical narration has to be expanded or unfolded, otherwise congregations read 'across' a narrative rather than being drawn into it. An instance of this is Exodus 2:2b where it says of Moses' mother, 'she hid him for three months'. Members of the congregation would understand the biblical quote to the extent that they could probably repeat it and they could say what the statement means in terms of definition. The level of understanding, however, could be extremely shallow unless the verse is 'unfolded' and its realities laid bare.

Reading 'across' a narrative means that people register it but do not penetrate a narrative at any depth, the eye or ear travels on to the next part of the story. With the revelatory plot this forward movement, so characteristic of the resolution plot, is often checked and the moment expanded in order to understand what this statement would mean. At the preparation stage the preacher makes brief notes concerning what the emotional, physical, social-economic, political and spiritual realities of the situation might have been. The following are a few brief notes on Exodus 2:2b.

> Not many places to hide a baby in a slave home, it would not have been large. Constant rocking, feeding, soothing. Exhausted mother constantly feeding, exhausted father and siblings, the whole family must have been involved. Shift system for looking after the baby. Sleeping lightly, awake at the first sound. They must not let the baby cry. Did they plan what they were going to do during the pregnancy? Did they hope for a girl? They would have heard soldiers coming through the settlement, banging doors, shouts, the sobbing of other parents. The roller coaster of emotions. Where was God in this? In the midst of this daily struggle can they really see the hand of God?

This story is often preached as an example of providence but that is the privilege of hindsight, the characters within the stories do not know the ending. Sometimes sermons present a simplified, stripped-down version of life that can be theologically simplistic and unhelpful pastorally. The combination of hindsight and simplification can increase the disconnect between biblical text and modern life. A living text of this biblical narrative begins to reveal something different. During those three months the family lived through the chaos of detail: the physical exhaustion, the boring repetitive actions of soothing and rocking, the fear. Moses' family, like the modern congregation, lived in a plethora of detail and seeing the hand of God at work is not easy. Recreating just a little of the situation allows people of the past to communicate with people of today in aspects of living that they share.

None of the details in my notes are in the text, but they are implied in the text. Paul Scott Wilson suggests bringing out these implications by asking questions such as 'who, what, why, when and where' and questions related to the senses; what can be seen, smelled, tasted, heard and touched?[1] Thomas Long suggests exploring categories such as cognitive elements, emotional elements and behavioural elements.[2] Thomas Troeger suggests physically going through some of the movements and actions in the text.[3] Whatever method is used, the narrative world can be turned into a living text.

The scenic character of stories can be brought to the fore by asking a series of questions about the different scenes: 'Who is present in this scene? How are they arranged? What do people see or hear? What physical contact happens? Richard Swanson highlights this, for where people are and what they can see and hear matters. He uses the example of the woman with a haemorrhage who would have heard the message that Jairus' daughter was dead (Mark 5:35); she must have wondered if her delay had meant Jesus was too late to save the child.[4] In the story of Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:21) Luke states that Jesus was baptised along with others, it was not a private ceremony. Asking questions about this scene may include the sort of people Jesus might have queued with, being jostled in the crowd, interacting with

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[1] Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart*, p. 64.
[2] Long, 'Shaping Sermons by Plotting the Text's Claim upon us', in *Preaching Biblically*, ed. by Wardlaw, p. 89.
[3] Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon*, pp. 53–66.
[4] Richard W. Swanson, 'Moving Bodies and Translating Scripture: Interpretation and Incarnation', *Word and World*, 31.3 (2011), pp.84-271–278 <https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/issues.aspx?article_id=1566> [accessed 10 February 2021] (p. 276).

them. This part of the process brings a sense of real people in real situations facing real issues rather than one dimensional people used to make a spiritual or moral point. Starting in this way roots preparation deeply in the text and in life. This initial process translates words into flesh and blood and matter, reversing the process where flesh and blood people and their situations were reduced to words. This follows up David Day's call for an incarnational principle in preaching noted in chapter two.

Immersion in the text is followed by stepping back and drawing on academic scholarship, for it is impossible to unfold a text without exploring the narrative in depth including its socio-economic and political background as well as its theological import. This roots the narrative in time and place, while bearing in mind it is the narrative world that is the focus. The academic research may cause a revision of the initial notes on the text as preachers may make modern assumptions that are not warranted. It also adds to the notes aspects of the text that preachers may have missed. Art can also be used either alongside the text at immersion stage or alongside academic scholarship as a visual commentary. The standing back from immersion to engage with scholarship also allows time for reflection that needs a certain amount of distance.

Understanding the biblical background (as far as it can be known) is important, for without this understanding modern assumptions can be imported, but that is a danger for any type of preaching. Background includes ways of thinking, believing and attitudes, not just customs and lifestyle. Attitudes to women, children and slaves and the role of reputation in relationships are just a few examples. Information about biblical culture may be incomplete, but preachers can work with what is known about the social-historical setting to present the characters' interaction with the world where the text signals that.

As noted, some stories need careful handling. The story of Moses contains violence against children. The threat should not be ignored, but it should be approached sensitively, through the fear of the parents rather than any detail concerning violence done to children. To dwell on the violence would be pastorally insensitive. An example of sensitive handling of a difficult story, the story of Jephthah, can be found in Appendix 1.

4.2 The process: locating an insight

As the living text is created insights tend to be revealed, but the whole story should be turned into a living text as more than one insight may be located. Insights reveal a

little of the true nature of something: a gesture or stance may give an insight into what someone is feeling; an action may tell something about a person's character; an object may be full of meaning; a sound or speech may communicate an insight into an issue. Insights can also be embodied in atmospheres and feelings, but these are usually transmitted through something that can be sensed either directly or indirectly. It is easy to drift into generalities at this stage, the focus needs to be on how the insight is embodied, staying with an incarnational style, constantly trying to clothe ideas and insights in flesh and matter.

In narratives, insights come through the material world even though people only perceive them through the written or spoken word. To differing degrees, people can imaginatively 'hear', 'see', 'touch', 'smell' and 'taste' what is read or heard. When an insight is formed, how it is embodied can be located by the preacher asking how they came to know the insight. Seldom in narratives are insights neatly spelled out. In the Moses example the insight may be that God's working is often far from clear in the detail of daily living, sometimes people only see the hand of God at work in their lives when they look back. That insight is embodied in the Moses story in the realities of hiding a baby and the dangers faced. Probably only looking back on the events of Moses' first few months would his parents have seen God at work in their situation. At the time it must have been all worry and hard work. The three months of anxiety, and the practicalities of hiding a baby, embody what the experience of God working in the midst of everyday life was like for Moses' family and how it is often experienced by Christians. To preach it from the beginning as God's providence, without engaging in the realities, without relating to ordinary human responses, could leave the congregation thinking that Moses' parents viewed the experience that way. It is hard to imagine a family in their circumstances just sailing through it thinking, 'this is all part of God's providence.' This would make the narrative difficult to relate to, they become unlike us and the story slips into irrelevance.

It is frequently small details that reveal an insight; the insight that the crossing of the Jordan river (Joshua 3:1–2) was a test of faith and a magnification of God's power comes through the textual detail of 'three days'. The Israelites camped by a fast-flowing river for three days, knowing they needed to cross it with children, the frail and the elderly and all their possessions. The physical experience of hearing the sound of the river and watching it from the banks for three days was a demanding test of faith. In the story of the golden calf (Exodus 32:1–4), an insight

comes through the Israelites' willing sacrifice of their earrings, probably the first things of value they had ever owned (Exodus 12:35). This action gives an insight into their need for control in a leaderless situation and their need of a 'safe' God.

Insights are not always located in individual details, sometimes they are woven throughout a narrative. However, it is still important to locate how the insight is embodied. Insight into the story of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1–11), may come through the fingers in the text, both physical and metaphorical: the pointing fingers that accuse, the finger of judgement, the finger with which Christ wrote, the pointing finger of self-recrimination.

Sometimes an insight comes through an image or word-picture triggered by the text rather than located in the text. The image of fighting with one hand behind your back may be triggered by the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21–48). It is a physical gesture that expresses the insight that followers of Jesus are in a vulnerable position as they seek to live by the values of the Kingdom of God in a fallen world.

Artworks related to the text may also reveal an insight. Art, as discussed in chapter three, often works in a revelatory style. Artworks, even representative artworks, do more than represent reality, they help people see the world in a different way and that includes the world of a biblical narrative. Simone Martini's 1333 annunciation image shows Mary keeping her thumb in her Bible. Traditionally Mary has the Bible open at a page predicting the Messiah. In this painting the Bible is almost closed and the thumb could be keeping her place so that she could carry on reading once the angel has left, indicating Mary's freedom to say no.[5] Such a gesture can also embody keeping options open.

Detail from Simone Martini's, *Annunciation with St Margaret and St Ansanus,* 1333.
Photograph by Paolo Villa, Creative Commons Attribution-share Alike 4.0 International License. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en

[5] Simone Martini, *Annunciation with St Margaret and St Ansanus,* 1333, tempera and gold on wood, 184 × 168 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/annunciation-with-st-margaret-and-st-ansanus> [accessed 10 February 2021].

In William Blakes' scene of Naomi releasing her daughters-in-law, Naomi is revealed as the one who is performing a sacrificial act as well as Ruth.[6] Naomi is letting Ruth and Orpah go, which would leave her alone with no one to support her.

William Blake, *Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab*, 1795. Image 2006BE8191, Museum Number: 69-1894 © Victoria and Albert Museum. Used with permission.

Blake shows Naomi's sacrifice by posing Naomi in the same pose as his painting of the resurrected Christ showing the marks of sacrifice.[7] The painting gives an insight into the narrative and a way of reading it as patterned by death and new life.

William Blake, *Christ Appearing to the Apostles After the Resurrection*, *c*.1795, Tate, N05875, digital Image © Tate released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 unported). Used with permission.

[6] William Blake *Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab*, 1795, fresco print on paper with watercolour, 43 × 58.5 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O134524/naomi-entreating-ruth-and-orpah-print-blake-william/> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[7] William Blake, *Christ Appearing to the Apostles After the Resurrection*, *c.* 1795, watercolour print, ink and varnish on paper, 40.6 × 49.9 cm, Tate Gallery, London <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/blake-christ-appeaing-to-the-apostles-after-the-resurrection-n05875> [accessed 10 February 2021].

4.3 The process: laying bare the situation

When the living text has been created and insights located, one or two insights can be selected for the sermon. Being selective means the preacher can return to the text and different insights can be presented at a future date. This part of the process involves laying bare the situation, holding up a 'slice of life' from the narrative that contains the insight or insights. As the form requires detailed presentation of some scenes, a sermon could become overburdened with too many insights.

With the main insight located, how the sermon is to be delivered becomes paramount, this means a careful selection of material from the notes of the living text for development. The scene that contains the main insight may be delivered in detail and other parts delivered more briefly so that time moves quickly in some parts then slows. Alternatively, if the insight is not focussed on one scene but woven throughout the narrative, which will need a different presentation, one that weaves the insight throughout the sermon as the narrative unfolds, drawing attention to the embodied insight.

Laying bare or showing a situation is about bringing people face to face with what is happening and holding it up for people to 'see'. If preachers move too quickly to what can be learned, people do not have time to identify with the characters, situations, and issues. The congregation need to feel the full force of a situation in order to appreciate its relevance. Moving too quickly to the overtly 'spiritual' can have the opposite effect of what is intended; without facing the depth of the reality communicated in the narrative a congregation may have difficulty realising the extent of God's role.

Staying with the Moses example, this extract draws on some of the notes from the living text and crafts them to lay bare a little of what might have been happening in the three months when they hid baby Moses. This sermon was an instance of an insight being woven through a sermon.

> The family work together to hide the child […] Miriam is still young, but she has a part to play, you grow up quickly when surrounded by danger. She knows her baby brother must not cry and alert the soldiers. They must be given no reason to search the house. He must be kept a secret from Egyptian neighbours who might betray them to the authorities. At the slightest noise from the baby, he is fed and rocked. He must not give away his existence. At night they sleep lightly, rising at the first whimper.[8]

[8] Margaret Cooling, *The Birth of Moses: Looking Back* <https://preachpreach.com/2018/10/11/the-birth-of-moses/> [accessed 10 February 2021].

A sermon can present a key scene containing the insight, as in the extract that follows, and this can be used to interpret the rest of the narrative. This extract from a sermon on Jesus' baptism (Luke 3.21–22) focuses on Jesus waiting with others on the bank of the Jordan river to be baptised, it is used to interpret the narrative with an emphasis on Jesus identifying with sinners.

> Among the crowd stands one who is different,
> but you would not know it.
> He wears the clothes of a working man,
> he is jostled by the crowd,
> he makes contact with his neighbours with eye and word.
> He smiles at the white-collar sinners,
> the blue-collar sinners
> and those with no collars at all.
> No T-shirt slogan declares him innocent.
> No halo marks him as holy.
> His clothes emit no glow.
> […]
> God in the crowd looks like the man next to him,
> who could be a con man.
> His feet are as dirty as the woman to his right,
> who could be a thief.
> He does not avoid the pimps.[9]

This scene happens to come at the beginning of the biblical narrative, but sermons can start with a key scene from any part of the narrative, as Paul Scott Wilson notes, the chronology of the text is rarely a determining factor in the chronology of a sermon.[10]

An example of laying bare a situation can be seen in Richard Briggs' sermon on Jephthah (Appendix 1). Jephthah's character and situation are revealed and the realities of the situation are exposed. This sermon exhibits many of the characteristics of the revelatory plot. Its mode is scenic, it is open-ended and moves backwards and forwards in time. The presence of anachronisms mean that Jephthah's story becomes a story of our times. The language is creative, draws on the senses and character and insight take the lead.

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[9] Margaret Cooling, *The Baptism of Jesus: God in the Crowd* <https://preachpreach.com/?s=Jesus+baptism/> [accessed 10 February 2021]. Appendix 3.
[10] Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart*, p. 178.

4.4 The issue of details

Luke 3:21–22 only relates that Jesus was baptised at the same time as other people. I have expanded this and added in details. What is the warrant for expanding the text in this way? One response has already been given; the details are implied even though they are not given in the text. The text says that Jesus was baptised when the people were, he did not ask for a private ceremony. The text records that many people had come to be baptised by John (Luke 3:7). John's baptism is described as baptism for forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). This means that Jesus stood alongside sinners. I have gone beyond this, saying he was jostled, and giving the people around him definite sins. It is difficult for a congregation to relate to a general term such as 'sinners', adding specific details brings the characters to life. There is no way of knowing Jesus' neighbours in that crowd, but I have used three principles to decide on details beyond the text: other scriptures, magnification and trajectory.

Other scriptures reveal some of the characters who came to John, they include soldiers and tax collectors (Luke 3:7–14). Other texts show Jesus' character and behaviour: he welcomed sinners and accepted their touch (Luke 7:36–50), he mixed with people disapproved of by the religious authorities (Luke 15:2), he was often jostled (Mark 5:25). My expansion of the text is also a form of 'magnification', to use Paul Scott Wilson's term. Within a text God's actions may be significant but they are often presented in a terse manner and their significance is not always perceived. Preachers can bring out significance by 'magnifying' God's actions. Imaginative details are not freely invented they are rooted in the meaning of the text, what Paul Scott Wilson calls the 'Godsense'.[11] In the example of Jesus' baptism, in order to magnify what Jesus was doing in identifying with sinners, I have added details of people who queued with Jesus and his response to them. Magnification of characters other than God is justified to the extent that they magnify God's action and presence. However, over-magnification of a character can be detrimental if it detracts from what God is doing. Although he is describing the development of doctrine, David Brown's term 'trajectory' is helpful in describing both the freedom to develop a text and its guiding role.[12] The text decides the trajectory for the development of details.

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[11] Paul Scott Wilson, *Broken Words: Reflections on the Craft of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), pp. 22-23, 32–33.

[12] David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 54–55, 306.

4.5 Emotional, spiritual and other realities

Laying bare a situation includes laying bare the emotional and spiritual realities of a narrative. Sometimes these are indicated in the text, sometimes actions and responses enable preachers to work out what people are feeling and experiencing. At other times preachers may have to infer them on the basis of other parts of Scripture or common human experience. Care needs to be taken not to ascribe emotions to a character on the basis of modern thinking. In a sermon on the birth of Moses I said that Moses' distressed parents prayed and wondered where God was in their situation.

> Hands that felt the kick of a baby are lifted in prayer. The God they have worshipped all their lives has surely not forgotten them. Where is God in this? Where is God in this danger? Where is God in this fear?[13]

None of the above extract is mentioned in the text, but would Hebrew parents not pray when their child was in danger? Would parents not wonder where God was in the situation? The warrant for this comes from other parts of Scripture. David prayed when his son was dangerously ill (II Samuel 12:16). Naomi thought God was against her when she lost her husband and sons (Ruth 1.13, 20–21). Hannah thought God had forgotten her (I Samuel 1.11). Analogous situations in Scripture can act as guides.

4.6 Learning to see.

A key skill in turning a biblical text into a living text is learning to see and giving focussed attention to the biblical text. This is a form of seeing that goes beyond the surface of the text in order to see people and situations and enter their stories. Wallace Stevens talks of seeing with an 'ignorant eye.'[14] It is trying to read a text as if it is for the very first time, for familiarity means readers glance over what is there and miss much. Throughout the homiletic literature there is a call for attentive seeing. Learning to see is a skill underscored by Ellen Davis and Kate Bruce who argue for a 'genuine seeing' rather than skimming the text. It is a seeing with all the other senses on alert.[15] Seeing things is explored in detail by Stephen Pattison in his Gifford Lectures. He accepts that seeing is not as straightforward and rational as

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[13] Cooling, *The Birth of Moses.*
[14] Wallace Stevens, 'It Must Be Abstract', in *The Collected Poems*, p. 402, l.5.
[15] Ellen F. Davis, *Wondrous Depths: Preaching the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), p. xiii. Bruce, *Igniting the Heart,* p. 145.

people think, we interpret what we see and often block out things without realising it. Until the Renaissance, and even beyond, sight was more integrated with the other senses. Seeing was more of an engagement with reality. Pattison advocates what he describes as a deep attentiveness where sight is linked to all the senses.[16] Craddock notes the problem of familiarity hindering what people see and hear, particularly with well-known texts. A new presentation is needed if a 'new hearing' is to be possible.[17] The preacher often has to make the familiar strange, showing the narrative from a different perspective.

4.7 Art and sermon form

Art can be integral to this process at any stage. It can serve as a visual commentary, it can afford insights into the text or become part of laying bare the situation. If copyright allows, artworks can be shown as part of the sermon where appropriate. When an artwork serves as a visual commentary, it does not need to be mentioned in the sermon, written commentaries are not usually mentioned. When an artwork becomes part of a sermon, a way of laying bare a situation, it does not always have to be shown. Sometimes an artwork can be described or, if gesture, composition and stance is important, members of the congregation can be arranged in similar positions or the preacher can make the gesture. In Blake's paintings, Naomi and the risen Christ mirror each other; this can be demonstrated by a simple pose. Care needs to be taken that the artwork serves the sermon context, it should not become an art lecture. Members of the congregation can look up the paintings after the service.

An artwork can suggest the way in which a sermon is presented. Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal* can structure the sermon that becomes a movement around the image revealing key insights in that scene.[18] This is a revelatory scenic presentation that is embodied in the physical form of art. Preachers can draw on art and the way a scene is presented and use that to inform their own scenes in a sermon. Synoptic art can also suggest revelatory sermon forms. A sermon can be based on the unusual connections synoptic art makes bringing new insights. Preachers can use the synoptic form in preparation by noting the different scenes in a story on pieces of paper and

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[16] Stephen Pattison, *Seeing Things: Deepening Relations with Visual Artefacts* (London: SCM, 2007), pp. 41-60

[17] Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel,* pp. 51, 77.

[18] Rembrandt, *Return of the Prodigal*, *c.*1688, oil on canvas, 262 × 205 cm, Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/01.+Paintings/43413/> [accessed 10 February 2021].

then arranging them in various ways to see what insights arise from different juxtapositions of scenes and different moments from within scenes. When an insight is selected, the sermon form can reflect the connection that brings the insight. Not all the different connections need representing, a key connection that comes to the fore can be explored in detail. This can be a form of defamiliarization that helps congregations see a text in a new way.

Naboth's vineyard is a scenic story where the synoptic approach can be used. It divides into scenes that can be put together in different ways. In the example below I have paired scenes. Not every combination will suggest an insight that will be appropriate, such an exercise is a starting point to stimulate thinking.

> **Scene A**: Ahab is denied the vineyard. **Scene B**: Ahab gains the vineyard. Insight - *Ahab gets what he wants but it turns to ashes because of the way it was obtained.* This is embodied in body language, first the sulk, then the standing alone in the vineyard.
>
> **Scene C**: Ahab sulking. **Scene D**: Jezebel acting.
> Insight - *Ahab had mental 'lines' created by God's law that he could not cross, Jezebel had no such 'lines'.* This is embodied in metaphorical lines that can be expressed physically in a sermon by stepping either side of an imaginary line or drawing a line in the air. A metaphorical line may not be physical but it draws on the physical reality of a line.
>
> **Scene E**: Ahab letting Jezebel act. **Scene F**: the doom pronounced by Elijah.
> Insight - *Doing nothing does not cancel responsibility.* This is embodied in Ahab's clean hands. No ink stained his hands — he did not sign the death warrant. No blood stained his hands — they threw no stones that killed Naboth. But to God they were ink-stained, bloodstained hands. Hand gestures can be used by the preacher.

Sometimes an insight is embodied in what is missing, as in this last example concerning Ahab. In such cases its absence is embodied, as it is in Ahab's clean hands. A sermon may open with a very physical reference to those hands and end with how God sees them in the light of Elijah's condemnation:

> Ahab looks at his hands, no ink stains his fingers, they are clean. <u>He</u> never signed the death warrant. He holds them up to the light, no blood stains his palms, they are clean. <u>He</u> never threw the stones that killed Naboth.

Simultaneous art can also suggest sermon form; in a simultaneous image Adam and Eve and the annunciation can interpret each other, showing that failure

was not the end, God once again risked all when he trusted Mary and Joseph. Sometimes artists express this simultaneous form in unusual ways; El Greco placed two relief sculptures on the walls of the temple in his *Christ Driving the Traders from the Temple*.[19] The two sculptures are Adam and Eve expelled from Eden and the angel staying Abraham's hand in the story of the binding of Isaac. These images are reflected in Christ's hands in the painting, one raised in anger against sin, the other raised in blessing. Bringing texts and art together in a sermon in this way can have a revelatory impact.

4.8 Ending the sermon

Paul Scott Wilson states that it is rarely necessary to tie up all the ends, preachers can trust the meaning of the story to be apparent. Simple reminders and an invitational, more open-ended format will often suffice. The story is completed in people's lives.[20] At other times a narrative may call for the significance and implications to be made clear. Revelatory sermons can end in a variety of ways but do not end with tight closure. The text and the nature of the insight control the degree of closure. The intersection of the sermon and the congregant's lives does not always need pointing out. Often the narrative is powerful enough to make relevance apparent and Lowry acknowledges that there is a temptation for the preacher to explain too much.[21]

Epilogues are one way of ending a revelatory narrative sermon, they can leave people with ways to be, feel, think or act. Not every sermon ends in pointers for action; being, thinking and feeling often have to change first. Epilogues are not about adding a moral to the sermon or pointing out the meaning in a didactic fashion. Tone is important. Reflecting on the significance of a narrative feels different to a didactic or moralistic ending, although the same content may be covered. A complete sermon with an epilogue is found in Appendix 3. An epilogue in a revelatory sermon may fulfil several functions. It may reflect on the meaning and significance of the narrative and its implications for people today; it can suggest what may happen in the future or put the narrative in a broader context. An epilogue can help people step out of the narrative, going from close-up to a long shot or create a 'leave taking' of the

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[19] El Greco, *Christ Driving the Traders from the Temple*, *c.*1600, oil on canvas, 106.3 × 129.7 cm, The National Gallery, London <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/el-greco-christ-driving-the-traders-from-the-temple> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[20] Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart*, p. 225.
[21] Lowry, *The Sermon*, p. 87.

characters. Epilogues can combine several of these functions. This section of an epilogue from a sermon on Hannah combines leave-taking with reflection.

> We leave Hannah now a mother.
> We leave Elkanah a little puzzled as to why they are suddenly blest with a son when all their previous attempts had failed.
> We leave Peninnah rather put out now that her favourite sport of taunting Hannah has ended […]
> It is no accident that the book of Samuel, a book about a nation, opens with a story about a woman's depression and childbirth. This area of life is not labelled 'private', it is not dismissed as 'woman's business' and of no consequence, it is not disregarded as too earthy to be spiritual. The quiet calling of Hannah to motherhood is central to the nation's story and is as spiritual as any other story in the book of Samuel. A spiritual life is just a life lived to God and it does not matter if that life is of a mother or a king.[22]

Sermons can end with a more focussed reflection on the significance of the central issue for today if that is needed. Sometimes the implications need drawing out in a reflective epilogue, as in the extract below.

> When it came to the exercise of power,
> Ahab could but didn't.
> Jezebel could and did.
> 'Because I could.'
> The cry of the powerful when asked to answer for their actions.
> Why did they lie, abuse, cheat?
> 'Because I could.'
> 'Because power made it possible.'
> We all have power that makes things possible;
> power conferred by status, age, ability, wealth, education.
> But these are the obvious forms, power is subtler than that.
> Beauty, relationships, fitness, popularity, even spirituality
> can confer power.
> Misused, they can give us the power to make others feel
> inferior, guilty, unloved, isolated.
> Jezebel had no lines that could not be crossed,
> for power tends to erase lines.
> It is hard to say, 'I can, but I won't.'
> Much easier never to have power in the first place.
> But we all have power.
> None of us are excused this struggle.
> We learn to draw lines for ourselves that we will not cross,
> lines not made by laws
> but by living according to Christ's way of love.[23]

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[22] Margaret Cooling, *Hannah: Too Depressed to Eat* <https://preachpreach.com/2018/10/11/hannah/> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[23] Margaret Cooling, *Ahab, Jezebel and Naboth: Because I Can* <https://preachpreach.com/2018/10/11/ahab-jezebel-and-naboth/> [accessed 10 February 2021].

An ending can soften closure by looking forward to the future.

> Joshua surveys the scene. He sees the people lined along the west bank, standing on the Promised Land. The people that wandered in the desert are now a nation ready to go forward. He sees the priests carrying the Ark with a wide space around them. God went before them into the waters. God went before them into the unknown. God is still with them. To the west he sees the towns of Canaan, the future. To the east lies Moab and the desert, the past. The wilderness years are over. Between past and future lies the river Jordan which they have crossed with God. They will face the future with God, as will we.[24]

4.9 Incarnation

This chapter identifies a revelatory approach as an incarnational style. The incarnation is about God taking flesh and thinking about the incarnation often focusses on the birth of Jesus but the incarnation applies to the whole of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The incarnation acknowledges the human body and its physical milieu as a locus of the spiritual; it shows that matter has the potential to be transfigured. Revelatory preaching is fundamentally incarnational.

4.9.1 Human and divine

The early years of Christianity were marked by a struggle to develop the implications of the Scriptural witness that described Jesus as pre-existent with God, and God come in flesh (John 1:1–18; Romans 8: 3; Galatians 4:4; Philippians 2:6).[25]
It was the early Christian councils that encapsulated the doctrine of Jesus as God incarnate, fully God and fully man, particularly the councils of Nicaea (325 CE) and Chalcedon (451 CE).[26] With Jesus' birth God enters time and the physical world and becomes available to the senses (I John1:1-2). Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel notes the very human nature of Christ in the Gospels. Luke tells of the swaddling clothes, the manger and the poverty (Luke 2:1–20); she describes God having a body as a scandal in the Romano-Greek world and as 'inconvenient' today.[27]

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[24] Margaret Cooling, *Crossing Jordan: Three Days* <https://preachpreach.com/2018/10/11/crossing-jordan/> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[25] Gerald O'Collins, 'Incarnation: The Critical Issues', in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, ed. by Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O'Collins, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 1–27 (pp. 3, 5).
[26] David R. Law, 'Incarnation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought*, ed. by Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 589–613 (pp. 589).
[27] Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body*, pp. xiii, 47.

In art, Christ's divinity is often indicated in light as in Guido Reni's *Adoration of the Shepherds*.[28] The full humanity of Jesus is expressed in art that shows Jesus as a baby, often deliberately naked, lain on the earth or breast feeding, as in Leonardo da Vinci's *Madonna Litta*.[29] With the incarnation the human body of Jesus became central to Christian theology. Aidan Nichols, in surveying the attitude of the Church Fathers, notes that they thought Jesus could be rendered artistically in all his humanity on the basis of the incarnation; art was a form of re-enactment of the incarnation.[30] The doctrine of the incarnation can be communicated by preaching that presents Jesus as fully human and divine.

Expressing the fully humanity and divinity of Christ changed over time. Although Christ's body dominated Medieval spirituality and Western art, it was not until the end of the Middle Ages that the full artistic and human consequences of the incarnation began to unfurl further. The incarnation affirmed matter, work and the things of this world, not just Christ's humanity. Ordinary life and ordinary people became the subject of art without any obvious religious content. By the seventeenth century Johannes Vermeer could paint a milkmaid and accord her dignity without adding anything overtly religious.[31]

4.9.2 Jesus' ministry

Jesus does not float through the Gospels, he lived and worked in particular places. Revelatory preaching acknowledges the role of setting and particular locations as a place of encounter with the divine. Susan White registers that while Jesus had 'nowhere to lay his head' (Luke 9:58), there is a strong sense of place in the Gospels. Jesus is born in Bethlehem, teaches and heals across Palestine and dies at Calvary. Space and time are affirmed as the medium in which Jesus lived and the locale for incarnation and revelation.[32]

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[28] Guido Reni, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1640, oil on canvas, 480 × 321 cm, The National Gallery, London <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/guido-reni-the-adoration-of-the-shepherds> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[29] Leonardo da Vinci, (attributed) *Madonna Litta*, 1490–1491, tempera on panel transferred to canvas, 42 × 33 cm, Hermitage, St Petersburg <https://www.wga.hu/html_m/l/leonardo/03/3litta.html> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[30] Aidan Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate: Theology and Image in Christian Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980), pp. 59, 82–83, 86.

[31] Johannes Vermeer, *The Milkmaid, c.*1660, oil on canvas, 45.5 × 41 cm, Rijks Museum, Amsterdam <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/rijksstudio/artists/johannes-vermeer/objects#/SK-A-2344,0> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[32] Susan White, 'The Theology of Sacred Space', in *The Sense of the Sacramental: Movement and Measure in Art and Music, Place and Time,* ed. by David Brown and Ann Loades (London: SPCK, 1995), pp. 31–43 (pp. 37–38).

Jesus' divinity is indicated by his power over nature (Mark 4:35–41), evil spirits (Luke 8: 26–39), disease (Matthew 8:1–3) and death (Luke 7:11–16). Jesus' knowledge went beyond what is human in cases such as Nathaniel (John 1:45–49) and the Samaritan woman (John 4:29) and he demonstrated knowledge of the future (Matthew 24:1-30). Jesus also claimed the authority to forgive sins, a power only God has (Mark 2: 2–7). In tension with his divinity, Jesus led a fully human life physically, emotionally and spiritually. He experienced hunger and thirst (Matthew 4:2 John 19:28) and he knew sorrow and joy (Matthew 26:37, John 15:11). Jesus was tempted and prayed to his Father (Matthew 4:1–11, Matthew 14:23; Matthew 26:30) and he admitted that his knowledge was limited; there were some things only the Father knew (Mark 13:32). These aspects are not ignored in revelatory preaching but the access to them is via the material.

Moltmann-Wendel is clear that Jesus was no 'gnostic hero' he lived a life characterized by features that define ordinary human lives. The Gospels record Jesus' physical and relational reality; he sweats and eats and is no stranger to familial conflict. The salvation he brings is not an abstract spiritual event; it includes the whole person. Jesus touches people, uses spittle, shares food and restores people to their communities. Incarnation is a key stone of embodied theology but it is not a new theology, it is a return to an old one.[33] David Wilkinson notes how feminist theology has put an increasing emphasis on the body, bodily life and the earth. The movement has seen a recovery of the importance of the body, sexuality, ecology and life in its full social-relational context.[34]

4.9.3 Death, resurrection and Ascension

The Apostles Creed locates the Crucifixion in time and human history, 'crucified under Pontius Pilate'.[35] The incarnation is about God assuming vulnerability from birth to death, from the threat of Herod's soldiers to the cross. Barth stresses the historical and concrete nature of the incarnation; it resulted in a cross where evil was made visible.[36] The Gospels do not detail Jesus' suffering, but they do show that Jesus experienced the cross in full humanity. He experienced dread in Gethsemane and prayed for suffering to be taken away (Matthew 26:38, 42), he cried out from the

[33] Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body*, pp. 37–38, 48–9, 58–60, 103.
[34] Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology,* pp. 146–47.
[35] *The Apostles Creed* <https://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/what-we-believe/apostles-creed> [accessed 10 February 2021).
[36] Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, pp. 94, 100.

cross (Matthew 27:46; John 19:28) and when his side was pierced blood and water flowed (John 19:34).

Joel Green makes it clear that belief in a bodily resurrection was neither obvious nor inevitable for early Christianity. Greek beliefs concerning the afterlife, ranged from scepticism to the resurrection of the soul and embodied afterlife. Jewish belief was far from uniform: some Jews believed in the immortality of the soul; some believed in the resurrection of the whole person, while some denied any form of afterlife.[37] Individual resurrection before the end-time was not integral to Jewish belief (John 11:24). The Apostles Creed contains the words, 'I believe […] in the resurrection of the body.'[38] This belief in bodily resurrection for all believers is anchored in the Resurrection of Jesus, whom the Gospels declare rose with a body that could be seen, heard and touched (Luke 24:36–43). Jesus in his resurrected state could both eat and cook (John 21:9–13). Although there was continuity with his earthly body, Jesus' resurrected body had different capabilities; it could appear and disappear. N.T. Wright uses the word 'transphysical' to describe Jesus' risen body and future resurrected bodies that are both 'robustly physical' yet different to the present body.[39] Joel Green calls Jesus' post resurrection body 'transformed materiality'. People at first do not recognize Jesus (John 20:14) though his body bears the scars of crucifixion (John 20:27). Jesus establishes his identity and physicality using 'many convincing proofs' (Acts 1.3). Jesus is presented as neither a resuscitated body nor an immortal soul, he is presented as an embodied person. Death has not been a discarding of the physical, but an 'embrace'.[40] Homiletic presentations of the resurrected Jesus can communicate this new embodied form.

Paul does not describe resurrection in terms of the immortality of the soul. Paul speaks of a glorified body (Philippians 3.21). In I Corinthians 15, Paul delineates bodies as appropriate for different contexts. For Paul, the resurrection of Christians is prefigured by the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of believers involves a resurrection body that will be different to earthly bodies, it will be animated by the Spirit, but there would be some continuity (I Corinthians 15:37–38). Paul uses the image of the seed and plant to communicate this.[41]

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[37] Joel Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, p. 60.
[38] *The Apostles Creed.*
[39] N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 3 (London: SPCK, 2003), pp. 477-78.
[40] Joel Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, pp. 166–69.
[41] Gooder, *Body*, pp. 49–50.

David Wilkinson emphasizes both discontinuity and continuity in the resurrected body and in the new creation. Matter is transformed in the new creation for people are not isolated but connected deeply with others and their environment. The resurrected body is placed in a wider setting (Colossian 1:15–20), all things are reconciled to God through Christ. The whole cosmos is involved, the material world is transformed not discarded. There is discontinuity, but this fits in with a more fluid or dynamic notion of matter rather than a static one. It is life for a different type of existence. 'The resurrection body is more than physical but not less, it is animated by the Spirit, dynamic in the sense of purposeful flourishing, freed from the decay associated with sin. Its context is new creation.'[42] This emphasis on the body and its on-going life sanctions the focus on bodily life in preaching.

Redemption is achieved by Jesus' bodily life, death and resurrection, something taken up by artists. The cross did not become a subject for artists in the early years of Christianity when persecution behove them be circumspect. Jesus' death and resurrection were indicated by images such as Jonah and the fish, but this was no denial of the flesh. Later, the cross and bodily death became a central image for artists. Some artists, like Matthias Grünwald in his *Isenheim Altarpiece*, show the full physical horror of the cross in order that those who suffer could identify with Christ.[43] Artists such as Pietro Perugrino show a more serene Christ but the marks of death are still apparent.[44] These serene paintings are not denying the physicality of the suffering, they are probing the meaning of the cross rather than realism.

Images of the resurrection use bodily posture to express the victory of the Resurrection of Christ over sin and death. Christ is often shown standing on an open or broken tomb carrying a victory banner marked with a cross, as in Piero Della Francesca's *Resurrection*.[45] Icons frequently express this by showing the risen Christ standing on the shattered gates of hell. The risen Christ is occasionally bathed in light

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[42] Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology,* pp. 89–91, 98–99, 156–57.
[43] Matthias Grünwald, *The Isenheim Altarpiece Closed*: *Saint Sebastian, The Crucifixion, Saint Anthony, Lamentation over the Body of Christ,* 1512–1516, oil and tempera on wood, 376 × 534 cm, Musée Unterlinden, Colmar <https://www.musee-unterlinden.com/en/oeuvres/isenheim-altarpiece-closed/> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[44] Pietro Perugrino, *The Crucifixion with the Virgin, Saint John, Saint Jerome and Saint Mary Magdalene*, 1482–1485, oil on panel transferred to canvas, 101.5 × 56.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.30.html> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[45] Piero della Francesca, *Resurrection*, 1463–1465, fresco and tempera, 225 × 200 cm, Pinacoteca Comunale, Sansepolcro <https://smarthistory.org/piero-della-francesca-resurrection/ > [accessed 10 February 2021].

or encircled with a sun, as in Grünewald's *Resurrection*.[46] The images do more than represent the scene, they interpret it, but the interpretations are not abstract, the risen Christ bears the scars of crucifixion.

Jesus ascends to the Father without discarding his resurrected body (Acts 1:9; Luke 24:50–51). He does not don humanity for a season only. In the fourth century, Gregory Nazianzen declared, 'If any assert that He has now put off His holy flesh, and that His Godhead is stripped of the body, and deny that He is now with His body and will come again with it, let him not see the glory of His coming.'[47] Barth asserted that Christ eternally maintains his humanity. 'It is a clothing which He does not put off. It is His temple which He does not leave. It is the form which He does not lose.'[48] The incarnation does not stop at the Crucifixion, or even the Resurrection, Christ's transformed physical body is not discarded but ascends. The twin actions of Christ descending and taking on full humanity and ascending without shedding his humanity affirm the physical and material nature of life and its ongoing presence with God.

The ascension has never been popular with artists and attempts to represent it can be crude with Jesus' feet protruding from a cloud like a rocket taking off, or the hand of God reaching down to pull Christ up, others show Christ in glory.[49] Many of the images are rather ethereal, which illustrates the problem Christianity had with the humanity of the risen Christ. The body is not shown in all its physicality but generally it is a scarred Christ who ascends.

The incarnation, from birth through to ascension, shows that the body, matter and the things of this world are the creation of a good God and have the potential to be transformed. Christ's full humanity and action in the world underwrites God's continued involvement with history, the material world and human beings in all their physicality. It is an affirmation of the value of this world and human life. This has consequences for preaching; the material situation in texts and the physical being of

[46] Matthias Grünwald, *The Isenheim Altarpiece Open: Annunciation, Concert of Angels, Nativity, Resurrection, Christ with the Twelve Apostles*, 1512–1516, oil and tempera on wood, 376 × 668 cm, Musée Unterlinden, Colmar <https://www.musee-unterlinden.com/en/oeuvres/isenheim-altarpiece-outer-wings-opened/> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[47] Gregory Nazianzen, *To Cledonius the Priest of Apollinarius* <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.iv.ii.iii.html> [accessed 10 February 2021], para. 4.
[48] *Church Dogmatics,* trans. by G. W. Bromiley ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 5 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2008) <https://archive.org/details/churchdogmatics0004bart_o5l9> [accessed 10 February 2021],<https://archive.org/details/churchdogmatics0004bart_o5l9> [accessed 18 February 2021], IV.2, p. 102.
[49] Richard Stracke, *The Ascension of Christ: Three Iconographic Traditions* (2016) <https://www.christianiconography.info/ ascension.html> [accessed 10 February 2021].

characters, including Jesus, are not something to be left behind when the meaning has been discerned. Disembodied meaning does not speak well to embodied beings who inhabit space and time and have to live their Christian lives in the material world.

4.10 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to develop a model for narrative preaching that is based on the revelatory plot, which integrates art at every stage, and gives preachers an earthed and incarnational preaching style. It also sought to earth this approach in a theology of the incarnation, drawn from Christ's incarnation from birth to ascension. This affirms the focus on the world of the text in terms of its materiality as a way of expressing its spirituality.

Preachers are not restricted to this expression of revelatory preaching; it is only one model. A range of revelatory narrative forms could be developed. Ways in which the text of the Bible has relevance for a modern congregation have been considered, through presenting characters and situations in all their materiality, enabling embodied biblical characters and situations to speak to embodied listeners. The detailing of characters and situations shows faith lived in the plethora of detail that is everyday life. This presents a version of faith that is not artificially simplified; it is a version that affirms ordinary Christian living. The reduction in pace gives time for the congregation to identify with characters and situations and the use of reflective epilogues can draw out significance.

These first four chapters have outlined a revelatory approach, where it sits in the homiletic literature and some of the theology that underpins it. It has detailed one way of creating sermons framed by a revelatory plot and explored some of the ways in which art uses a revelatory, showing style. The second half of this thesis looks at responses to this approach.

Preface to Part Two: Responses

The first half of this thesis made the case for the revelatory plot as a way of approaching narrative preaching. Three art styles were considered as models of a revelatory approach and art was integrated into the process of creating sermons in a revelatory style. The first four chapters raised a series of issues in areas as diverse as theology, language, epistemology, philosophy and hermeneutics. The second half of this thesis details responses to those issues.

Chapter five responds to language issues raised by the revelatory plot. I suggest critical realism as a way of understanding the way in which we relate to reality and how that knowledge of reality is expressed in language. I discuss narratives as a way of coming to know truths about the world and how the 'mere words' of a sermon may be able to communicate the realities of biblical narratives and the experience of lived reality. In this chapter I argue that although language is a human construct, there are a variety of different ways in which language relates to reality and can communicate the real. Figurative language, Nelson Goodman's exemplification and Roland Barthes 'reality effect' all contribute to this argument. I explore how some language styles can preserve an invitational approach and help people generalise what they have learned. This chapter also contends that the use of prologues and twice-told narratives can accommodate different language forms, widening what a preacher can use within one sermon.

Chapter six is a response to issues of interpretation in both textual and visual narratives. The focus of a revelatory approach is on the narrative realities exhibited in a text. In this chapter I contend that where those realities have some degree of historical foundation, they will affect interpretation. The realities of author, text and reader are acknowledged and their roles in interpretation. This results in a cooperative hermeneutic. I suggest that author/artist, the text/artwork and the reader/viewer create an arena where meaning and significance is developed, and where hermeneutic virtues such as humility, trust and wisdom are exercised. The relationship to reality is allowed to exercise appropriate control over meaning and Paul Ricoeur's three-stage hermeneutical arc is put forward as one way of understanding a route to meaning.

This chapter argues for hermeneutics as a way of enacting meaning in the world, rather than being an abstract discipline. To this end I detail J. L. Austin's speech act theory as it focuses on what words do. Relevance is a key feature of this

chapter for meanings are not severed from reality, they are embodied in Christian living. The approach's invitational nature is maintained by a participatory hermeneutic and interpretation is framed by its relationship to the overarching story of the Bible and the gospel as rendered by Scripture.

Chapter seven is a response to issues of epistemology raised by this form of narrative preaching. The central question being: how do people come to know through biblical narratives (textual or visual) and what sort of knowledge does a narrative express? In this chapter I make a case for a broad understanding of how people come to know rather than restricting knowledge to propositions and justified true belief. I argue for understanding as an aim for knowledge in the preaching context and the route to that includes personal, non-linear, intuitive, and aesthetic knowing. Theologically, I include a theology of revelation in this section as it is the other side of knowledge, arguing for an understanding of revelation that embraces general revelation through creation, culture and history within a framework of special revelation through Christ and Scripture.

Chapter eight is a response to the hesitations some preachers may feel in using imagination in preaching. This chapter argues for imagination in all its functions as integral to all stages of preaching. To this end this chapter explores issues around the Bible and imagination, the historical witness concerning imagination, and how free preachers are to use their imagination in sermons. I argue for a broad definition of what the imagination is and how it functions, drawing on the work of Kate Bruce, Richard Eslinger and Philip Wheelwright. I contend that imagination is different to fantasy, is rooted in the material world, and has a role to play in revelation and in understanding the image of God in humanity.

Chapter Five

Responses to the Challenges Raised by Language

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the relationship of language to reality and ways in which different types of language can be used in sermons to communicate the realities within a biblical narrative and the realities of lived experience. The intention is to give preachers ways of using a wide range of language forms and techniques that communicate a sense of the reality of biblical people and situations, where the text signals that. These are language uses that remain faithful to the text and conserve the approach's embodied, invitational nature. The aim is to help preachers use language that facilitates recognition and identification so that congregants recognize biblical narratives and the truths they contain as relevant to their lives evoking a response that relates to head and heart.

This section also seeks to give a philosophical underpinning to a revelatory approach in critical realism so that use of the words 'real' and 'reality' are understood in nuanced ways and a naive realist approach is not assumed.

This chapter also aims to give preachers ways of creating sermons that can embrace different language styles, creative and explanatory, through the use of prologues and twice-told forms. Throughout this chapter I use extracts from my own sermons to demonstrate techniques.

5.1 Critical realism

In this thesis I frequently refer to 'reality', 'the real world', 'the real'. The relationship we have with reality is an issue: Is there a world out there that language can describe? In what ways do biblical narratives and the truths within them relate to reality? Can language be a way of communicating reality? The philosophical stance I take in this thesis is one of critical realism. At its most basic this is a position that maintains that there is a world that exists that is not dependent on human knowledge of it. Some things are true regardless of human knowledge of them. The world was spherical before Greek philosophers posited its shape, before Greek mathematicians calculated its circumference, and before views from space verified that fact. We can have reliable knowledge of the world but our understanding is incomplete.

Critical realism is not a monolithic philosophy, it is understood in different ways, however, its basic feature is its stance towards reality. The world and events can be known in some way. The effects of the mechanisms that create the physical

and the social world can be observed and from that we can gain some knowledge of reality. I have chosen a critical realist stance as it preserves a relationship with the realities — physical and social — but the nature of that relationship is nuanced. From a critical realist position, there is a world that exists that is not mind-dependent, not just a human construct; things can exist regardless of human knowledge. However, something being real and human understandings of it are not the same. Accepting a degree of epistemic relativism need not imply ontological relativism, as Edward Schilbrack points out, relative understanding does not have to mean relative truth. Our understanding is limited by our cultural and historical positioning and our conceptual systems; knowledge of the world is mediated, it is not direct, but it is possible.[1]

Critical realism charts a course between a naive or direct realist position and the world as a human construct. Andrew Wright describes critical realism as a middle way between the certainties of Modernism and the radical uncertainty of Post-Modernism. Things can be real even if our understanding is not complete, for our knowledge of something does not indicate all there is to know. This acceptance of partial but real knowledge gives confidence to navigate the world and leaves space for knowledge to grow with further encounters with reality. Critical realism's affirmation of humanity's ability to access reality has implications across the disciplines. Although he worked before critical realism was developed as a philosophy, Einstein expressed the idea that the natural sciences rest on a basis of belief in an external world that is independent of the person perceiving it [2]

Alister McGrath notes that most natural scientists choose a critical realist position that opts for an indirect experience of the world mediated via perception.[3] Critical realism also accepts the reality of social and relational structures and their mechanisms; these are structures that can be studied and used. [4] This aspect of critical realism has an impact on disciplines where human relationships and social structures are integral to its study. Different disciplines yield different understandings of the world. Physical aspects of the world can be explored through mathematics,

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[1] Edward Schilbrack, 'Embodied Critical Realism', *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 42.1 (2014), 167–179 <https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12050> (pp. 168–170).
[2] Andrew Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism,* pp. 9. 10-11, 13-14.
[3] Alister E. McGrath, *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) <https://archive.org/details/foundationsofdia0000mcgr/page/156/mode/2up?> [accessed 22 February 2021], pp. 154–57. Internet Archive ebook.
[4] C. Bagley, A. Sawyerr, and M. Abubaker, 'Dialectic Critical Realism: Grounded Values and Reflexivity in Social Science Research', *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 6 (2016), 400–419. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/aasoci.2016.612030> (pp. 400-403).

physics and chemistry; its social and relational realities can be studied through disciplines such theology, sociology and political science. The different disciplines can give complementary accounts of the world from a range of perspectives, resulting in a layered understanding. Critical realism an appropriate foundation for developing a revelatory preaching style where narratives are a way of coming to know truths about the world — spiritual and material.

Critical realism eschews a focus on objective truth and neutrality; it also rejects radical relativism, which can paralyse confidence in the text. What is needed is 'proper confidence' to use Lesslie Newbigin's phrase.[5] In critical realism, personal values and commitments play their part in understanding the world, (and the world of the text) they are the position from which thinking starts; there is no neutral position from which to view any reality. Human understanding of reality and the interpretation of experience allow for the possibility of error as human knowledge of the world is always partial, influenced by tradition and situated in a socio-historical moment. Ernst Gombrich asserts that there is no such thing as the 'innocent eye' or the 'innocent ear'.[6] Nelson Goodman stresses that vision and understanding come with a history, which affects how we select and organize knowledge and experience.[7] Critical realism acknowledges the role of presuppositions and the part that subjective knowledge has to play in understanding, without giving them a decisive role. People do not have to be passive victims of their presuppositions. Critical realists, such as John Polkinghorne, acknowledge the role that social factors play in knowing the world but they do not *determine* knowledge; the physical world resists being too 'pliable'. Although reality can be known, such knowledge is not absolute, John Polkinghorne speaks in terms of verisimilitude rather than absolute truth. He thinks in terms of a middle way between certainty and relativism and a 'critical adherence to rationally motivated belief, held with conviction but open to the possibility of correction'.[8]

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[5] Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence, Faith Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

[6] E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, millennium edn, Bolligen series XXV. 5 (Princetown: Princetown University Press,1960/2000) <https://archive.org/details/artillusionstud00gomb/page/n3/mode/2up> [accessed 10 February 2021], p. 363. Internet Archive ebook.

[7] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 2nd edn (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), pp. 7–8.

[8] J. C. Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science*: *The Terry Lectures,* new edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) <https://archive.org/details/beliefingodinage0000polk> [accessed 19 February 2021], p. 15, 98, 104, 108, 115.

Brad Shipway, in his description of critical realism, relates it to Christian theology, with God existing independently of human belief or understanding. He maintains that certain aspects of God are within human understanding, although that is usually indirect and through analogy. For critical realists, the world is explored within a framework of a mind-independent reality. Knowledge is inevitably provisional but much of it is reliable. It is possible to make claims about the real world that can be justified while accepting that such knowledge may be amended later.[9] The critical realist position calls for confidence in human ability to interact with the real world, material and social, but humility in terms of human understanding and interpretation. This need not lead to uncertainty and lack of confidence; it may lead to a rejection of over-rationalistic sermons and accompanying dogmatism.

5.2 Critical realism and the dichotomies

If preachers are to present the realities of a narrative world and relate texts to the real world, values cannot be omitted as they are part of social realities that critical realism accepts and revelatory preaching exposes in presenting a narrative. Values are integral to the Christian faith. Direct or naive realist views tend to divorce fact and value, seeing facts as relating to the world but values as more nebulous. This is a difficult stance for preachers as it gives values a lesser status. Shipway describes critical realism as reconciling dichotomies such as mind and body, fact and value. Fact and value relate, people do not inhabit value-free situations and the facts of a situation can trigger value judgements.[10]

Catherine Elgin labels the dichotomy of absolute facts and arbitrary values as philosophy's bipolar disorder, which prevents it from seeing how fact and value relate to each other and how the arts and sciences overlap. Although she does not overtly classify herself as a critical realist, Elgin rejects a dichotomy of facts and values; facts can be value laden. She denies a simplistic view of facts as 'absolute, material, objective, and impersonal' and verifiable by scientific method, in contrast to values that are deemed to be 'relative, spiritual, subjective, and personal' and beyond assessment. In life, fact and value are difficult to separate. People decide what they count as fact, theories go beyond the facts and science is collaborative,

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[9] Brad Shipway, *A Critical Realist Perspective on Education* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 17, 20–21.
[10] Shipway, *A Critical Realist Perspective,* pp. 53–54.

which means values such as truth, fairness and trust come into play as do aesthetic values such as simplicity and elegance.[11]

A second area is truth and rationality, a crucial area for revelatory preaching as its narrative form — as with other narrative forms — is sometimes deemed less rational because it does not proceed in a strict logical-rational way. Post-Modernism tends to separate truth and rationality, emphasising the difficulty of deciding between competing truth claims. In contrast, what Shipway calls 'classical views' closely link truth and rationality. Critical realism is a middle way between these two positions; the importance of making truth claims and being able to justify them is affirmed but truth is not equated with rationality. The link between truth and rationality is not uncoupled but it is loosened. Claiming something is rational is not the same as claiming it is true. Rational thought, however, is valued and rational thinking may have developed the way it has because it reflects something about the world. Critical realists perceive the world as intelligible, and human theories about the world are the result of an encounter with a reality that exists apart from the investigator. Reality is not just a human construction.[12] Albert Einstein reflected, 'The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility.' […] 'The fact that it is comprehensible is a miracle.'[13] Truth expressed in narrative form is not an abandonment of rationality but the development of a different form of thinking that has its own logic and ways of expressing truth, a subject developed in chapter seven. This looser link between truth and rationality also preserves revelatory preaching's invitational approach.

Although critical realism does not accept dichotomies of fact and value, truth and rationality, dissimilarities are accepted. Critical realism also sees the disciplines of art and science as overlapping sets not separate spheres; they provide complementary accounts. The problem is that the language that communicates truths about reality in science is not the language that communicates truths about reality in narrative. Elgin summarises the difference in terms of general and particular. Science refines the encounter with the world into generalizations and theories; it likes to rationalize in order to exclude exceptions. Science favours 'predictive, quantitative laws' whereas narrative has a different emphasis, it deals in 'the particular, the

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[11] Catherine Z. Elgin, *Between the Absolute and the Arbitrary* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 1, 11, 176–77, 185.
[12] Shipway, *A Critical Realist Perspective,* pp. 17, 33, 39.
[13] Albert Einstein, 'Physics and Reality', *Journal of the Franklin Institute,* 221.3 (1936) 349–382 <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-0032(36)91047-5> (p. 351).

exceptional, the unique'.[14] In revelatory preaching, the showing and dramatizing of specifics aids in presenting texts as relevant to the congregation as it allows people to relate on a human scale, though congregants also need to know how to widen what is learned to other situations.

Critical realism suggests a use of language that cuts across what Wittgenstein labelled 'language games'. A language game is the way language is used by a group according to the rules of the 'game' being played, with 'game' referring to the context within which the meaning of words is shared and understood within the group. The word 'king' has a particular meaning within a chess playing group which is not shared outside that group. Wittgenstein eschewed looking for one core meaning of a word and suggested instead 'family resemblance' in word use and this allows for some overlap in meaning.[15] Critical realism cuts across language groups by relating language to a knowable external reality shared by all, language becomes less subjective.

5.3 Language and reality

This brings the discussion to ways in which language has reference, relating to realities outside itself and how it communicates a sense of the real. All preaching needs language that relates to reality, for the gospel is lived out in the world, it is not just a matter of intellectual assent to abstract beliefs. Revelatory preaching is especially concerned with the way language refers to and communicates specific aspects of reality, for narrative insights are embodied in material reality. Without reference language remains abstract and general and it can be difficult for a congregation to see how it relates to life.

In this thesis I take the position that some knowledge of reality can be communicated by language, although it is never a neutral sign system. This eschews the naive realist position that language describes the world 'as it is' and the radical position of some Post-Modernists who see texts as unstable in terms of reference, with no source of meaning independent of language. Critical realism is a middle way between these two positions. A critical realist position in terms of language means that language cannot be understood without some degree of reference, but language

[14] Elgin, *Between the Absolute and the Arbitrary*, pp. 177–178.
[15] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd edn (New York: MacMillan, 1958/1973) <https://archive.org/details/philosophicalinvestigations_20191119/page/n19/mode/2up> [accessed 19 February 2021], pp. 13–15, 35–36, 50-51,73.

never completely expresses reality. There is a genuine connection but not a simplistic 'one-to-one' word to reality correspondence, the relationship is nuanced. Revelatory preaching uses language that relates to the realities revealed in the text without language being confined to a literalist mode. Revelatory preaching can use different types of language, each retaining reference in some form.

Although the real-world relationship of language is important, it only takes a preacher so far if that relationship focuses on 'facts'. Experience of the real world includes relationships, emotions, spirituality, economic and political realities and physical life. Argument from the facts alone tends not to move people. People are rarely argued into the Kingdom of God and such an approach can feel coercive rather than invitational. People should not be 'wrestled… into submission' by logic'.[16] A different type of language is needed if a sermon is to relate to contemporary believers, it needs to be a language that relates to the world, to people's experience and has an affective as well as a cognitive dimension. Such language goes beyond correspondence, without jettisoning it, to one of layered meaning appealing to mind, body, heart and will. The way language is used is important for it not only articulates how we see the world; it shapes our experience of it. Language is versatile and can relate to reality in many ways.

5.3.1 Denotation and connotation

At a basic level, words can carry a sense of reality in terms of denotation. Words can refer to things in the real world about which there is some level of cultural agreement concerning the sign and the referent. Not every sign has a referent, connectives such as 'but', 'also' and 'so' do not have referents, but that is not a reason to deny referents to all signs. Language can also be denotative in a broader way; it can denote in terms of whole scenarios that relate to real-world experience as a means of interpreting larger sections of narrative.

An example of simple denotation in an English-speaking, western culture is the word 'dog'. As a broad term people know what the word dog means. There may be imprecision in this type of language but there is enough precision to function in terms of relationships with the material world. The word 'dog' in a narrative may not be a straightforward reference to a particular animal. Dog can cover many things, including different breeds, fictitious dogs (the hound of the Baskervilles) and

[16] Chapell, *Christ-Centred Preaching*, p. 164.

historical dogs (Laika, the first dog in space). The word 'dog' keys into the readers' broad experience of dogs in order to understand a narrative. Despite this, the word 'dog' is limited, it tells us enough to give some stability of understanding but little in terms of depth. Denotation is a basic level of relating to reality. Roland Barthes calls this 'unvarnished' or 'concrete reality'.[17] Denotative language is used in narrative but despite its basic referential nature, it does not necessarily trigger a *sense* of the real that a congregation needs to perceive relevance. Without an embedded web of connections, denotation functions as little more than a dictionary definition.

Connotation is the extension of the meaning of a word or phrase by the emotional and cultural connections people make and the ideas associated with a word or phrase. Connotation goes beyond the literal meaning of a word and can be negative or positive. The word 'gun' has the same literal meaning in Britain and America, but the connotations are different. Many words work by a web of connections created by the connotations a word has. This allows words to not only denote but also carry a large amount of information about human experience of the world. Connotations dwell in people's minds or in a community where a particular set of connotations is shared, these are often determined by culture, tradition and history (personal, communal and national).

Nelson Goodman develops another aspect of connotation; he refers to chains of reference. Reference does not have to be direct or simplistic to have a foothold in reality. The connotations words have may trigger a series of connections only some of which have direct reference. Goodman's chains of reference recognize complex referral and allusion. The word 'bulldog' may go through a chain of references that includes abstracts such as strength and tenacity, a symbol of Britain, Winston Churchill and World War II as well as referring to an actual dog. These chains work by connotation, links made within the mind. Language can have reference whilst carrying much more freight, in Goodman's terms it can be 'semantically dense'.[18] Chains of reference and connotation work well with the revelatory plot which is often intertextual. Words may trigger a chain of references, but guidance may be required if unsuitable connections could be made.

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[17] Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', in *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader*, trans. by R. Carter, ed. by Tzvetan Todorov, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1982), pp. 11–17 <https://archive.org/details/frenchliteraryth0000unse> [accessed 10 February 2021] (p.14). Internet Archive ebook.

[18] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, pp. 65–66, 252–53.

5.3.2 Exemplification

Goodman explores how language can both denote something in reality but have meaning beyond reference. In his use of exemplification, Goodman presents a broad understanding of reference. Firstly, Goodman describes exemplification as display. This relates to the revelatory plot that 'displays' or lays bare part of a narrative, showing a 'slice of narrative life'. To exemplify something is to display, show, exhibit, highlight and instantiate, rather than just refer to something. Exemplification is 'possession plus reference'. [19] A tester pot of paint does not just refer to a colour in the way a label does, it possesses the colour. In art, to exemplify a quality it must possess that quality; it must display it. For an artwork to exemplify sadness it must show sadness in some form, such as by expression and gesture as in Munch's *Melancholy*.[20] Not just any image can be labelled 'sad'. There is a relationship to reality that stops labels being arbitrary.

Goodman uses the instance of a tailor's swatch to explain exemplification. A sample of cloth exemplifies weave, colour and texture; it displays certain qualities. Once a person gets to know the sample, they can recognize it even if it is made into very different articles, for they will share the qualities that the sample possessed even though other factors are very different. Getting to know a sample allows people to recognize other things with some of the same qualities in different contexts. This helps in classification and recognition.[21] Elgin talks in terms of 'telling' examples that deepen understanding and give 'epistemic access' that 'opens a window on the world'.[22]

Secondly, Goodman talks of displaying qualities metaphorically, sadness can be expressed metaphorically in the use of colours such as grey and blue. To display something metaphorically may not be literal, but it is actual; to display something figuratively is not literally true but neither is it false. It is still 'real'. Possession, including metaphorical possession, is more direct and more intimate than straightforward denotation that merely points beyond itself. Goodman's work was primarily on art, but does exemplification work with language? Goodman notes that language differs from art in that a word itself does not inherently display; the word

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[19] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, pp. 52–53.

[20] Edvard Munch, *Melancholy*, 1892, oil on canvas, 96 × 64cm, National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/en/collection/object/NG.M.02813> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[21] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, pp. 51–59, 88.

[22] Elgin, *Between Absolute and Arbitrary*, p. 65.

'red' is not red, the word 'sad' is not sad. However, he refers to language descriptions, not individual words, as being like paintings.[23] On this basis, language compositions, such as a sermon, could function in a similar way to an artwork, a term often used of revelatory works. They could form an internal theatre of the senses, creating images and sensations that display people, situations and relationships in all their specificity, displaying their qualities. This, too, can act as a sample helping people classify future experiences and realize their import and relevance.

Using Goodman's metaphorical display, a sermon could both refer and possess; it could display the people, situations and relationships using a style of language that metaphorically possesses some of the qualities it speaks of. In speaking of the crucifixion language can 'possess' something of the nature of grief. Basic referential language would just refer to blood, nails and wounds but language can do more than that. The follow extract from a sermon on the crucifixion does not just refer to grief, its slow pace, rhythm, length of line and repetition possess something of the quality of grief.

> Soldiers dice,
> oblivious to the misery.
> Life goes on,
> despite the agony -
> now as then -
> in his pain and ours.
> We feel that time should stand still,
> to salute anguish.
> The world should bow its head,
> in acknowledgement of grief.
> But children still play.
> Work still has to be done.
> The body still demands food.
> Soldiers still dice.[24]

Exemplification speaks to the problem with examples noted by Day who responded to concerns that the more specific examples become, the fewer people can relate to them. Revelatory preaching that displays is very specific, which ought to limit the number of people that relate to the sermon but Goodman's exemplification turns this on its head; the more specific language becomes the more people recognize the instance and this enables them to identify it in other situations. Superficially, this

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[23] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, pp. 5, 50–52, 68–69, 77.
[24] Margaret Cooling, *Crucifixion: Too Much*, unpublished Good Friday Reflection, 2018.

looks like a contradiction; getting to know a single person or situation should narrow relevance, but Craddock notes that although the accepted wisdom is that people have to share a particularity for it to have value, it is in particularity that the universal lies.[25] The answer to the contradiction lies in the difference between exemplification (and the particularity of revelatory preaching) and the type of example Day refers to. In using an example, the preacher points the congregation to a person or situation. It is an external view. In exemplification, the congregation are drawn in and look from within a narrative. The focussed detail of revelatory preaching means that the congregation come to know the situation and characters to the extent that they can recognize key factors elsewhere. Becoming specific aids generalisation and helps people to see the relevance of biblical narratives to their lives . Learning within a microcosm facilitates learning in a macrocosm. The more specific language becomes, the more it displays qualities, the more it prompts recognition of those qualities in different situations.

A popular example of particularity enabling recognition and wider application would be Agatha Christie's Miss Marple who lives in the small village of St Mary Mead. Miss Marple knows her village and its inhabitants well and this deep knowledge allows her to function in the wider world as a detective. She often identifies in a crime situation some person or incident from her village that enables her to solve the crime. Kathy Mezei describes the way this local knowledge is gained as 'surveillance'; it is close observation of an 'enclosed' and 'contained' context such as the village.[26] The close and detailed observation allows a degree of crossing gender, time, and culture. Revelatory preaching on Ruth can exemplify her qualities and situation to the extent that a twenty-first century male in a non-agricultural context can realize the truth and relevance exhibited in that story, which promises may be made in poetry but are paid in pain and hard work (p. 152).

5.3.3 Description

In the arts, language dramatizes human involvement with the world in terms of particulars and qualities. Description, as part of this dramatization, can bring insight as new likenesses and differences are brought to people's attention and new combinations help them to rethink the world. Roland Barthes, in his essay *The*

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[25] Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 130

[26] Kathy Mezei, 'Spinsters, Surveillance and Speech: The Case of Mis Marple, Miss Mole, and Miss Jekyll', *Journal of Modern Literature,* 30.2 (2007), 103–120 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4619330> [accessed 10 February 2021], (pp. 104–110).

Reality Effect, discusses touches of description that structural analysis ignores as 'superfluous' or 'padding' or just assigns to them a cumulative role of creating an atmosphere and adding aesthetic value. This role is not, however, to be dismissed lightly, Barthes asserts the significance of these insignificant touches of description. He quotes Michelet's description of Charlotte Corday in her prison cell waiting to be executed. Charlotte is sitting in her cell and 'after an hour and half someone knocked softly at a little door behind her'. In terms of the plot, descriptive details are not necessary; the reader does not need to know the size and location of the door or the softness of the knock but they do build atmosphere. These small details also have another important role. Barthes points out that they are not 'narrative luxury' or 'useless details'; they may not be necessary to the movement of the plot; nothing depends on them and they do not predict future action, but they signal 'we are real'. They create what Barthes calls, a 'reality effect'. These details are not there to depict reality in terms of exact correspondence; they are fragmentary details that signify the real.[27] In terms of preaching, small touches of 'the reality effect' announce to the congregation the reality of situations and characters, which facilitates relevance and identification. Often these are just a few words, 'wet clothes clinging to his legs'; 'clothes dark with sweat'.

This 'reality effect' works with the impressionist touches of description in revelatory preaching. It reflects the real in the sense that it is probable in the context of the narrative. Small touches of description can carry a sense of the real and create a visceral connection. Day describes Jesus coming to John to be baptised:

> When he came to John, John was visibly shocked. Held him off. 'Not you. Never you. This is for the rabble, the sinners. You're not part of their world.' And Jesus put his hand on John's arm and said, 'Let it go. Right? This is where I am meant to be.'[28]

The description of Jesus putting his hand on John's arm is not necessary to the plot, but it taps into feelings associated with that gesture that many people have experienced outside of the baptismal context. This sense of the real is created by what is triggered in the different senses of the listener, helping congregants relate to biblical people and events.

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[27] Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', in *French Literary Theory Today,* ed. by Todorov, pp. 11–17 (pp. 11-12, 16).
[28] David Day, *A Preaching Workbook*, (London: SPCK, 1998), p. 82.

Goodman's work on art distinguishes between fidelity and realism. To be faithful in art, the object, scene or person that the painting depicts needs to have the properties the painting assigns to it. A painting of a jug labelled 'seascape' fails in the sharing of properties. In language, which Goodman often parallels with art, the equivalent would be description. A description needs to share the properties that the biblical text displays, but it is not limited to that. Description in a sermon can be faithful to the text but not necessarily literal. In art, Goodman maintains that reference is necessary, but realism is not a matter of 'absolute relationship' between picture and object, and what we count as realistic is often culturally determined.[29] Description is also not about an 'absolute relationship' between a preacher's description and the reality depicted in a text, for our knowledge of that reality is incomplete, but faithfulness in reflecting that reality matters.

5.4 Figurative language and reality

Revelatory preaching uses creative, figurative language, which can be seen as far from the real world with little reference, but cognitive linguists such as Raymond Gibbs demonstrated that it is not just literal language that relates to reality. Figurative language uses real-world experience. The constraints and possibilities of reality shape metaphorical thinking as we use the familiar physical world to understand the more abstract aspects of life. An instance of this is the way 'seeing' is used of understanding, borrowing a word from physical vision. 'Metaphorical meaning,' asserts Gibbs, 'is grounded in non-metaphorical aspects of recurring bodily experiences or experiential gestalts.'[30]

Gibbs is not alone in this physical grounding of thinking; the work of Lakoff and Johnson highlights the role of the body in the workings of the mind. They argue that the mind is 'inherently embodied', our access to the world is through our bodies and the way we reason is shaped by our bodies as it draws on both bodily existence and environment. This does not make truth subjective because we share embodiment with others and this allows for more stability of understanding, whilst still allowing that we are socially and historically situated.[31] Language's ability to carry a sense of reality and truth can be increased by using metaphor. Goodman points out that when

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[29] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, pp. 36–39.
[30] Raymond W. Gibbs Jr., *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 7–8, 16, 158–60.
[31] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 5–6.

considering truth, it does not matter whether language is literal or metaphorical, both can be true in different ways, both are part of the actual. Figurative reference is not a diluted form of literalism; it can refer and also expose new patterns, links and distinctions that go beyond the literal and reveal insights about life.[32] Paul Ricoeur conceded that direct reference to reality was suspended with metaphor but only to liberate language to engage in a more effective style of reference.[33] Anthony Thiselton, commenting on the relationship of reality and metaphor in Ricoeur's writings, describes Ricoeur's view of metaphor as 'redefining' and 'redescribing' reality. Metaphorical language does not abandon reality, it conveys a new vision of it. [34] The revelatory plot's use of creative language is another way it relates to reality that may key into congregants' experience.

Figurative language's rooting in the world and experience guides the way in which metaphor is used. Lakoff and Turner note the multiple images we have of death; people talk of death in terms of a light going out, departure, sleep and night. A metaphor needs to reflect the reality of human experience. Death as the Grim Reaper works with human experience whereas death as a baker does not. Complex connotations are often involved in figurative language, which means that a paraphrase does not represent its complexity.[35] John Donne's description of love as 'without sharp north, without declining west' cannot be adequately summarised as 'our love will not grow cold or end.[36]

We use experience of the real world to understand the abstract in metaphorical expressions. Our understanding of physical strength is used to understand moral strength.[37] By connecting two apparently different things metaphors deepen understanding. Lakoff and Turner point out that our understanding of real journeys (the need for a guide and decisions concerning which path to take) is used to help us understand life as a journey. This is a common metaphor that

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[32] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, pp. 51, 68–69, 80.
[33] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1,* trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, new edn, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. x–xi.
[34] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Power of Pictures in Christian Thought*: *The Use and Abuse of Images in the Bible and Theology* (London: SPCK, 2018), pp. 47-48.
[35] George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 7–8, 11–32, 79, 120–22.
[36] John Donne, 'The Good Morrow', in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by A. J. Smith (London: Allen Lane: 1971), p. 60. l.18.
[37] Mark I. Johnson, 'Embodied Reason' in, *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture,* ed. by Gail Weiss and Honi Fern Haber (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 81–102 (pp. 94–95).

structures concepts about life. The Psalms, Jesus, Dante and John Bunyan all use this metaphor.[38]

Some preachers may be anxious concerning perceived difficulties in processing metaphorical language. Anthony Sanford notes that literal language was thought to be the norm and figurative language the exception, however, the work of Gibbs and others have shown that metaphor is widespread and figurative language is not processed any slower than literal language. Conventional metaphorical language is processed automatically, but processing can be slowed by new or unusual metaphors.[39] New or unusual metaphors can also defamiliarize a narrative or idea; they can encourage people to rethink but timing is important, people need to be able to reflect on new metaphors or hear the preacher reflecting on them. Too many metaphors used close together fail to allow the congregation time to dwell on them and feel their power. The reflective nature of revelatory preaching gives congregations time to do this. A metaphor can open a whole domain and bring with it a new way of thinking. An instance of this is speaking of a callous attitude in terms of stone. Once this connection is made all sorts of options open up from the stone domain: hardness of heart, cracks emerging in a person's position, chipping away at resistance, walls of defence collapsing.

The understanding of metaphorical language is guided by tradition within a community. Within the Christian community people know that when Jesus is referred to as 'The Good Shepherd' they are not meant to understand that he was low paid and worked nights. Anthony Thiselton emphasizes the need for interpretation for both visual and word images. Metaphor has surplus meaning and is powerful but requires an interpretive framework provided by tradition and community. He observes that symbolic language is often 'our path to truth' but such language can both reveal and hide. Metaphors are always partial, multiple images are needed.[40]

5.4.1 Connections to the physical world

Lakoff and Johnson demonstrate how many of the basic metaphors we use to structure our thinking are rooted in the physical world. The word 'up' tends to be used for happy, 'down' tends to be used for sad. In the sentence, 'She felt down', there is a physical reference; when we feel down, we droop. People tend to use down

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[38] Lakoff and Turner, *More Than Cool Reason*, pp. 3–4, 9–10.
[39] Anthony J. Sanford, and Catherine Emmott, *Mind, Brain and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 58–59.
[40] Thiselton, *The Power of Pictures*, pp. 23-24, 40-41, 55-58.

for sad and happy for up because that best reflects our experience of life.[41] People may no longer be aware of the physical references in basic metaphors as they may operate below a level of consciousness. Nevertheless, many metaphors operate at a conscious level; being on the 'margins' of society and being the 'centre' of attention retain some sense of connection to the physical world whilst also being mapped onto human experience of relationships.

Innovative metaphors also retain their connection with the physical world, as do conventional metaphors used in a new way. Viewing John the Baptist as a 'spiritual checkpoint' on the road to God retains its link to something in the material world. Some of the less well-known biblical metaphors for God, such as God as midwife (Psalm 22:9–10), still have a conscious physical component. Other forms of figurative language, such as similes, can also have a real-world element. The Day of the Lord is described as coming like a thief in the night (I Thessalonians 5:2). Calamity can overtake like a storm (Proverbs 1:27). The physical element of this type of language can be developed in a sermon staying with the simile and expanding it as Brown Taylor does.

> Like any other thief, this one is after your valuables, but unlike any other, he knows what they are: not your silver and your stereo but your heart, your soul, your mind. Those are the treasures this thief's own heart is set on.[42]

Figurative language can play its part in conveying a sense of reality as well as aiding understanding. Metaphors, should, however, be used appropriately; too many metaphors can pull attention in different directions, blurring meaning.

5.5 Maximizing techniques and lyrical language

There are techniques, which can increase a congregation's perception of the sermon as engaging with lived realities, they could be classed under the broad term 'rhetoric' as they are concerned with effective communication. One technique is to use the historic present. Traditionally, the historic present is used for vivid and exciting events, but does it *make* the past more vivid and exciting? Although there is some debate around how the historic present tense functions in relation to the present

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[41] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 14–15.
[42] Barbara Brown-Taylor, *Home by Another Way: Biblical Mediations Through the Christian Year* (London: SPCK, 2011), p. 8.

tense, Deborah Schiffrin's research indicates that it moves events out of the past and into the moment of speaking, particularly in continuous forms. This gives language dramatic force. The historical present tense does not have to be maintained throughout a narrative, there can be a switching between tenses.[43] Ronald Allen presents the story of the Good Samaritan as if it is happening in the present. 'He lies under the sun in shock; he looks dead - blood dripping and drying, mouth dry, scum forming.'[44]

The historic present can intensify a narrative and give a sense of immediacy communicating that the past still has something to say to us today. Warren Wiersbe advocates preaching in the 'present tense' so that preachers are not always talking about people in the past.[45] It can also function as a defamiliarization technique, reducing the predictability of well-known narratives. Revelatory works are often creative with time and preachers can use tenses in different ways to bring the past to life, but this needs to be natural for the text.

Direct speech can be more vivid than reported speech and give a sense of immediacy and may sound a note of authenticity.[46] Small amounts of direct speech can be added without burdening a sermon with long quotations. Matthew 5:21–24 may be presented as 'Deal with your anger', says Jesus, going straight for the well-spring of violence. 'Be reconciled.' Such quotations do not have to be exact as long as they are true to the meaning of the text.

Another device that aids engagement and reflects the embodied nature of the revelatory plot is framing that roots a narrative in a real-world context. The framing can include a definite place or time and other concrete particulars and language that gives sensory and emotional resonance.

Consider the following framed example based on Acts 10:9-10

> The scene: the bustling Gentile seaport of Joppa. Peter sits on the rooftop porch of Simon the tanner. It is noon, and he stares at the tall sails of fishing boats nearby. He tries to pray, as is his noonday custom, but he is restless and preoccupied. The smell of cooking food downstairs reminds him of his hunger. But the other smell, of those

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[43] Deborah Schiffrin, 'Tense Variation in Narrative', *Language*, 57.1 (1981), 45–62 <doi:10.1353/lan.1981.0011> (pp. 46, 51–52, 57–58).

[44] Ronald J. Allen, 'Shaping Sermons by the Language of the Text', in *Preaching Biblically*, ed. by Wardlaw, p. 47.

[45] Warren W. Wiersbe, *Preaching & Teaching with Imagination: The Quest for Biblical Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), p. 30.

[46] Schiffrin, 'Tense Variation', p. 58.

> freshly tanned animal hides drying in the sun, tells him he is surrounded by uncleanness. [47]

This can be compared with the following summary example:

> Peter felt hungry as he was praying on the rooftop of Simon's house.

The framed example gives geographical detail and taps into the senses of smell and sight. The summary example has no geographical and temporal details and everything is rather general, Peter just prays and feels hungry. Summary writing has a low level of sensory stimulation and emotional resonance and often lacks specific action that takes place on a particular occasion at a named place. A summary does not enable people to experience events on a human scale and a congregation needs to experience a narrative at that scale to register that it is relevant and has something to say to them. Language that deals in time and space and emotional resonance brings narrative to the level at which people experience life. Revelatory preaching can deliver contextual framing by its emphasis on specific contexts: spatial, relational, emotional, and temporal.

As already noted, a presentational or 'showing' style is preferred to a reporting or telling style, for displaying is integral to the revelatory plot. Reporting or telling has distance, it looks back and tells the congregation what happened. A showing style describes events as happening. A reporting example would be, 'King Uzziah died and the nation mourned.' A presentational/showing style would be, 'King Uzziah is dead and the nation is mourning.' Specific language is also appropriate for a revelatory plot style. Words easily default to abstractions; a conscious move is needed to make language specific. A general statement such as 'Abraham and Sarah were childless' can be changed to, 'They were always uncle and aunt, never mum and dad.' This makes language less general and gives it resonance with a congregation.

This is a style that burrows deep into the material in order to reach the spiritual rather than touching upon it lightly and using it as a springboard. Keying into a specific situation to understand a larger, more general one is a well-known technique used in the media. An example of this is the girl in the red coat in the film *Schindler's List*.[48] Understanding the horrors of what happened to the Jewish people

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[47] Don. M. Wardlaw, 'Shaping Sermons by the Context of the Text', in *Preaching Biblically*, ed. by Wardlaw, pp. 60–83 (p. 75).

[48] *Schindler's List*, dir. by Stephen Spielberg (Universal Pictures, 1993).

is initiated through focusing on one child.[49] Journalists, instead of reporting on a situation abstractly, may tell the story of one family to help people relate to a distant situation. The American war correspondent, Ed Murrow, posted to Britain in the blitz, once portrayed the atmosphere of an air raid by describing the way shrapnel drilled holes into tins of peaches.[50] Language can get physical. Instead of general statements about the disciples toiling across the lake in the storm (Matthew 14:22–33), the focus can change to a close-up of the physicality of the event, 'soaked, their teeth chattering and their hands blistered from their efforts'.[51]

The language style of revelatory works is sometimes described as impressionistic. In impressionist paintings, just a few brush strokes can be enough to suggest an object or person. Similarly, just a few words can be enough to give a touch of realism rather than a long and detailed description. For preachers, the art lies in creating a vividly portrayed scene with a limited amount of detail. This touch of reality is not only created by what the words indicate but also by what they activate in terms of the senses. Kate Bruce evokes a funeral and grief with just a short statement, 'The sound of earth falling on a coffin lid.'[52] This 'light touch' description is true to reality. In everyday life, when we see something, we do not note every detail like a still-life painting. It takes deliberate visual attention to see in detail. The most realistic description is not necessarily the one with the most detail.

5.5.1 Lyrical language

Lyrical language is traditionally sung poetry but I am using it interchangeably with the word 'poetic' as this latter term occurs in the homiletic literature. Lyrical language can have the qualities of poetry without being formal poetry. Craig Barnes describes the pastor as a 'minor poet' and the language s/he uses as poetic. This is not calling preachers to be poets in the traditional sense, but poetic in vision and the way language is used. Poets look beyond the obvious and penetrate the surface of the ordinary. Their language is not the language of argument or defence but exploring and 'finding Jesus Christ, the God with us, as the mystery and miracle beneath

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[49] Louis Bülow, *The Little Girl in Red* (2015 to 2017) <http://www.auschwitz.dk/redgirl.htm> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[50] Jolyon Mitchell, *Visually Speaking* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark: 1999), p. 52.

[51] Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), p. 57.

[52] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart*, p. 178.

everything'. The pastor as 'minor poet' is intent on revealing and showing the presence of Christ. [53]

Walter Brueggemann calls for poetic speech, but he uses the term broadly to refer to language that, is 'dramatic, artistic' and evocative.[54] Bruce is equally clear that lyrical preaching is not a call for preaching to be poetry. Lyrical language needs to be accessible and created for the ear in a way that engages all the senses. Like Brueggemann she defines lyrical language broadly; it is language that uses imagery, draws on the senses, reduces the use of adjectives and adverbs and layers description to build up the effect. Such language uses repetition and rhythm and other musical aspects of language that can be highlighted in delivery so that the rhythm is not lost.[55]

Lyrical language appeals to the whole person, not just the mind. The *primary* purpose of lyrical language is to invite people to respond, rather than communicate information and doctrine or to explain or prove things, though all of these may also happen. Lyrical language is not the language of relentless logic that funnels people into a binary response (accept or reject), it is invitational, not coercive. It is language with emotional resonance and sound patterning that contributes to the overall impact of a narrative alongside the content. Such language is felt in the body. Language in many forms has rhythm, it is not restricted to poetry. Rhythm is hard to escape, it is built into the universe: day and night, the seasons, the rhythm of tides. Derek Attridge emphasizes the relationship between poetic language and the body. Our bodies are centred on rhythms of muscles and lungs. Poetic rhythm is felt as well as heard and our bodies respond to the beat, the pauses and the breaks. Rhythm and language set up expectations that create an onward movement that can be felt. Poetry has movement in terms of sound, meaning and emotion; it is a form where meaning is experienced through both mind and body.[56] We respond to rhythm and there is a felt dis-ease when an expected rhythm is missing. The *Last Post* leaves the hearer longing for a final note as it does not resolve, and that longing can be physical.

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[53] M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet: Texts and Subtexts in the Ministerial Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 17–18, 125–26, 131.
[54] Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 3–6.
[55] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart,* pp. 57–58, 60–62.
[56] Derek Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 1–5, 23.

Rhythm can intensify language, signal beginnings and endings and important points. Shakespeare changes the rhythm and uses rhyme to effect closure in these lines from *Hamlet.*

HAMLET Let us go in together;
And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
'The time is out of joint, O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right! '[57]

Lyrical language, rhythm and repetition can be used in sermons; preaching can draw on the patterns of poetry without necessarily becoming poetry. Prose can have its own rhythms. As an oral art, preaching can draw on language's natural rhythms to resonate with the congregation and aid memory. Rhythm and repetition are important, but it is also important to know when to break them. In the example below carrying on the 'not a…' for further lines would not have been as effective. Sometimes a more prolonged repetition 'works', but it needs to be tested by ear and for meaningful impact.

Not a hint of thanksgiving.
Not a suggestion of welcome.
Not an iota of joy.
Not a whiff of excitement.
Only fear.[58]

Our minds expect patterns such as alliteration, rhyme and assonance. An example of this is the expectation of alliteration, which leads many Christians and lyricists to pair 'the lion and the lamb' rather than the wolf and the lamb of Isaiah11:6. Alliteration is a form people are familiar with and small touches of alliteration can be used in sermons: 'world of wonder', 'creation to cross'. Too much alliteration can sound forced or comic. Assonance is harder to detect as it uses vowel sounds that echo each other, 'The death sentence envelopes them all.' Alliteration and assonance can create different moods, depending on the sounds highlighted. Our minds and bodies respond to those moods. Assonance and alliteration are part of a wider sound patterning. Churchill's speeches are replete with sound patterning and when the American commentator, Ed Murrow, heard Churchill's 'fight on the

[57] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet_1_5.html> [accessed 10 February 2021], v.1. 187–90.
[58] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart*, pp. 187–88.

beaches' speech he declared that Churchill had 'mobilised the English language and sent it into battle'.[59]

The language of the sermon can draw on the lyrical language of the Bible to resonate with hearers. The Bible is full of lyrical language that is rich in images, is occasionally alliterative in its original form, but it does not rhyme; much of the rhythm, assonance and alliteration is lost in translation. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp notes how early translations of Hebrew poetry were influenced by English concepts of rhythm and metre; it was not until Robert Lowth's translations of poetic parts of the Bible in the eighteenth century that the natural Hebrew rhythms began to be felt. English can replicate some of the original sound patterning, but translation may 'mute' some of the rhythm. The original Hebrew emphasis was on rhythm, which aided memory in an oral culture; rhythm guided how the poem was spoken and in some ways was like a musical score.[60] Brenda Boerger maintains that Hebrew poetry's musical rhythm needs a 'song-based translation' that is sadly lacking in many versions of the Bible. The refrains in Hebrew poetry, such as Psalm 136, can be repetitive in translation, which is not true if it is sung, as it would have been in Hebrew.[61]

Dobbs-Allsopp emphasizes the rhythm of biblical poetry, which creates patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables followed by pauses that are unique to each poem. Biblical poetry does not have a regular sustained metre or line length. Line groupings vary, though couplets and triplets are common. Lines are often paralleled in meaning and both rhythm and words contribute to the sense as in Psalm 19:1. Biblical poetry generally has a non-metrical free rhythm, though occasionally a metrical pattern is sustained for part of a poem then deviates. Psalm 19 is an example of this, verses 7–10 have a regular rhythm that is broken before and after.[62]

> The Law of the Lord is perfect,
> reviving the soul;
> the decrees of the LORD are sure,
> making wise the simple.' (Psalm 19:7)

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[59] Ed Murrow*, Comment on Churchill's 'Fight on the Beaches' Speech* <https://www.historynet.com/photos-of-winston-churchill-at-war.htm/winston> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[60] F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199766901.001.0001/acprof-9780199766901> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 97, 104–05, 117, 144, 157, 160–61. Oxford Scholarship ebook.
[61] Brenda H. Boerger, 'Freeing the Bible to Sing'*, Open Theology*, 2 (2016) 179–203 (pp 179, 198, 201) <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2016-0014>.
[62] Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry*, pp. 98–103, 126–27, 136, 155.

Sound patterning of various kinds can be an integral part of preaching, highlighting certain parts of a narrative, creating different moods. Rhetorical devices can engage a congregation but they need using with care, bearing in mind the context and aims. A preacher aims for a response that combines head and heart, not just an emotional response. An over-emotional approach as well as an overly logical one can be coercive.

5.5.2 Manipulation

Revelatory preaching uses artistic forms of language that connect with the heart as well as the mind. Although initially this may be seen as less authoritarian than preaching that follows a strict logical pattern, the use of effective communication techniques and emotion raises the issue of manipulation. Are such the language techniques detailed in this chapter manipulative? The revelatory approach is invitational and people should not swept along to agreement by emotion and techniques that by-pass the mind.

Working with how people learn is not manipulation, it is acknowledging how we are made. Manipulation is about power and control and involves a distortion of communication for those ends. It involves intellectually or emotionally overwhelming people, leaving them feeling that they have to assent.

Working with the grain of the text means not using rhetoric that distorts the texts intent and not using techniques that the text does not warrant in order to control the congregation. Rhetoric is not about displaying the artistry of the preacher or misusing that artistry. Preachers can learn from artists. Artists do not always use all the colours available to them, some, like Rembrandt, worked with a restricted palette. The use of techniques should be decided by what is needed and warranted by both text and context.

Authentic rhetoric can encourage people to willingly use their senses to imagine scenes. It can send people back to the text and provoke discussion. Used well, it can fulfil Augustine of Hippo's triad of functions; to delight, instruct and move.[63] One key to distinguishing between appropriate rhetoric and manipulation lies in intent. Does the sermon include the preacher or is it only speaking to the

[63] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/12024.htm> [accessed 10 February 2021], IV. 2.

congregation? Is the movement all in one direction, the direction of assent? Preachers may want a response but the response should be invitational. It may mean not presenting an argument too tightly or limiting the emotional impact so that the listener is left with freedom to respond in their own way. Preachers can refrain from filling every gap so that the congregation has room to deliberate on their own questions raised by the text.

Generally, as Walter Brueggemann has noted, people do not change by coercion. Congregations do not need sermons filled with 'oughts' and 'musts' that do not help them live the gospel in the contemporary world.[64] Aggressive tones or inducing guilt or fear in order to control people is also manipulative. The revelatory plot with its ambiguities, reflective nature and often ending with possibilities leaves the congregation free to fill gaps in their own way. Clader talks of preaching in a way that allows listeners to 'experience their own freedom under the reign of God'. The preacher can share what s/he has 'caught a glimpse of' without forcing others to see exactly the same thing from exactly the same perspective.[65] One way of testing for manipulation is for the preacher to consider how the sermon would feel if she were sitting with the congregation. Is there a sense of freedom to respond in different ways?

5.6 Spiritual realities and the language of the senses

The preacher is not only concerned with truth in terms of accuracy about material details; she is also concerned with spiritual truth that is recognized as part of reality by believers. This concern with spiritual truth does not have to lead to unearthed abstraction, it can lead to a deeper engagement with the material situation displayed in a biblical narrative. Richard Swanson used drama to penetrate to the physicality of biblical narratives and it is that physicality that is often key to understanding the spiritual import of a text. The characters in Bible stories have bodies and faces and they respond to encounters with God in their lives, the spiritual is rarely, if ever, experienced outside the material.[66]

The physical nature of spiritual truths matters, particularly in the case of Jesus. If Jesus was fully human as well as fully God then certain things follow: his feet got dirty, the wind whipped his hair into his eyes, and his clothes got soiled

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[64] Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1997), p. 8. W. Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, p. 84.
[65] Clader, *Voicing the Vision*, p. 96.
[66] Richard Swanson, 'Moving Bodies', pp. 271–76.

when kneeling in prayer, and that soiling would have been the colour of local earth. These are things that can also happen to us, things with which people can identify because they are part of being human. For the reality of the incarnation to begin to communicate, congregations need more than ‘Jesus was like us so that he could make atonement’, they need to see a little of that everyday likeness in order to identify him as Emmanuel, God with us. If congregations do not see it in the small things, it is hard to comprehend it in the larger and more abstract ones, which is why embodiment is so important in revelatory preaching. If doctrine is not proclaimed in the material, congregations are unlikely to comprehend it in the spiritual. Fran Ferder comments, ‘We cannot be deeply moved to transcendent life until we have been deeply moved by present reality. We do not move to the transcendent by skipping over the human, but rather, by knowing it to the full.’[67] Without this engagement doctrine has little resonance with a congregation.

To engage people in this way the preacher has to deal in the language of the senses. These sensed details act as guy ropes stopping the sermon flying off into unearthed abstraction. They give a ‘reality effect’ even if it is not *exactly* what happened as that cannot be known. Such effects should follow the trajectory of the narrative and work within the arena of interpretation created by author, text and reader, an issue I discuss in the hermeneutics section. In the case of the story of Jesus walking on water (Matthew 14:22–33), the text says there was a high wind. In a sermon on this text, I talked of the wind whipping Jesus’ hair into his eyes, though I do not know if it was long enough to do that.[68] I could equally have chosen to comment on what the wind was doing to his clothes. It would have been wrong to say nothing about the physical circumstances or to say, ‘untouched by the storm he looked across the lake.’ Such a statement, or lack of physical circumstances, puts Jesus outside ordinary experience and he becomes a docetic figure, untouched by reality. He becomes unlike us. If doctrine is to be perceived as relevant it needs to be sensed, rather than be a list of beliefs. Not every part of the narrative needs treating this way, for this would over-burden the sermon, sometimes just small touches are needed.

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[67] Fran Ferder, *Words Made Flesh: Scripture, Psychology & Human Communication* (Notre Dame IN: Ave Maria Press, 1986), p. 52.
[68] Margaret Cooling, *Jesus Walks on Water: He calms the Storm – Sometimes* <https://preachpreach.com/2018/10/10/jesus-walks-on-water-he-calms-the-storm-sometimes/> [accessed 10 February 2021].

Some preachers may query why such sensed language is needed as the Bible is not replete with description. There is sensed language in the Bible in terms of some personal descriptions, as with the young David (I Samuel 16:12), but generally biblical stories did not need many sensed details as people lived similar lives and shared a culture and they would have been able to supply the details. Original audiences needed little to prompt connections with daily life. In modern urban cultures, reference to ancient agricultural life has few connections. It is different if someone mentions the internet, this comes with a host of connotations and sensate experiences as it is deeply embedded in modern living.

Earthed language that deals in the senses and specifics, may be new to some preachers who are used to preaching in points and in a more abstract manner. Representational artists, however, cannot escape the need to make decisions concerning physical particulars that engage with the senses, it is not an option they have. George Whalley sees poets as equally bound by the tangible and specifics, 'The function of art is to convey, not generalities, but uniqueness.'[69] In representational art, characters inhabit a definite space, wear particular clothes, express recognisable feelings and make specific gestures. Artists have to work within a physical space and they use colour, line, texture, and composition to evoke a range of senses. The artist has to make decisions about specifics. Such is the artist's bind. The preacher can learn from the artist, accept some of that bind and refuse abstraction and generality that does not touch sensed reality.

5.7 Excursus: preaching in points

I have suggested that a points structure is not suitable for revelatory preaching, it is worth briefly discussing some of the reasons for this. One member of a congregation expressed her surprise when my sermon was not delivered in points, she had never heard a sermon in any other form until that day. For many people, like this congregant, what is often considered to be 'traditional' preaching is preaching in points; Peter Adam describes it as a 'common pattern'.[70] Expository preaching is one place where points-based preaching is often encountered, although writers on expository preaching, such as Haddon Robinson, do not see expository preaching as only preaching in points. Robinson is flexible, nevertheless, the points structure is

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[69] George Whalley, *Poetic Process: An Essay in Poetics* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1967), pp. 3, 23.

[70] Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), pp. 133–134.

commonly used in this style of preaching, as reflected in Robinson's own book *Biblical Preaching*.[71] Bryan Chapell explicitly links expository sermons and points, seeing the sermon as having main points and subpoints that reflect the text.[72] There is nothing inherently wrong with points, used well and on appropriate texts they can be effective communication. It is a telling rather than a showing style but that is suitable for some texts. However, preaching structured on points has come under criticism around four issues: imposing an alien structure, authority, being over-rational, and non-Christian origin.

Points can impose a structure that goes against the grain of the text if the text is narrative and John Holbert suggests that imposing a points structure on such texts could be 'unbiblical' in that is alters the narrative form into a discursive one and the text no longer has the force of the original.[73] Roger Standing suggests that this may be doing violence to some texts.[74] Chapell freely admits the difficulties of fitting biblical narrative into a points model and does not reject narrative preaching as long as it does not abandon propositional truth.[75] Points assemble and structure ideas and they are appropriate for discursive texts that have strong propositional content as they can communicate an analysis, differentiate ideas, and present them in an ordered fashion. Lowry, however, criticises the language of construction and space, often used in point-based preaching, as lacking movement and sometimes leading to disjointed sermons.[76]

One of David Norrington's chief criticisms of traditional preaching is its authoritarian nature and one-way communication, which may move a congregation into a passive lecture mode and de-skill them. He condemns preachers coming to conclusions with little congregational involvement.[77] There can also be a strong element of proof associated with points-based preaching, which is regarded as essential by both Chapell and Robinson.[78] O. Wesley Owen describes the preacher as seeking to persuade people of the truth and importance of the main point by the use

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[71] Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), pp. 83–95, 105–106.
[72] Chapell, *Christ-Centred Preaching*, p. 132.
[73] Holbert, *Preaching Old Testament*, p. 48.
[74] Standing, *Finding the Plot*, p. 130.
[75] Chapell, *Christ Centred Preaching*, pp. 164–65, 187–89, 202.
[76] Lowry, *Doing Time in the Pulpit*, pp. 12–15.
[77] David C. Norrington, *To Preach or Not to Preach?: The Church's Urgent Question*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), pp. 77–80.
[78] Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, pp. 53-55, 82-83. Chapell, *Christ Centred Preaching,* pp. 121–22.

of logic and argument.[79] Keith Willhite asks what is needed to help listeners accept the claim of the sermon; his response is evidence that will convince.[80] This aspect of points-based preaching needs to be handled extremely well or it can feel coercive leaving little freedom in response. A showing or presentational style is more of a joint activity, an unfolding of the story together. Schlafer insightfully captured the difference between a showing and telling style in terms of stance. When you share a story you (metaphorically) stand beside them, when you impart ideas, the preacher figuratively stands in front of them.[81] Application in a points-based system tends to come from the preacher and may have little congregational involvement. The closed nature of the form may not encourage ongoing congregational reflection. Stephen Wright sees preaching moving away from authoritarian styles that do not serve the kingdom of God.[82]

Roger Standing is critical of traditional preaching, which can be perceived as too rationalistic and elitist. Although it may serve those who are logical and think sequentially, it does not suit people who learn in a more intuitive and holistic way. This language of logic helps people distinguish truth from falsehood but images and stories, although they have less analytical precision, may accord with how many people think and are easier to remember than points.[83] Chapell's approach is propositional, logical and focussed, he talks of 'boiling out extraneous thoughts and crystalizing ideas'. Ideas are then developed in points and subpoints.[84] Haddon Robinson locates concepts and ideas as central to expository preaching, he presents them in points but is flexible in the way he does this.[85] Lowry notes how the over-rational emphasis on explaining and ideas can lead to an attitude of 'mastery' or control, rather than being mastered by the text. Lowry talks instead in terms of shaping and listening.[86] Application is taken seriously in points-based preaching and is the goal of exposition, but if points are *extracted* from a text and become abstract concepts and general principles it can be difficult for the preacher to apply them to

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[79] O Wesley Allen Jr, *Determining the Form: Structures for Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), pp. 20–23.
[80] Keith Willhite: *Preaching with Relevance Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001), pp. 35–40.
[81] Schlafer, *Playing with Fire*, p. 66.
[82] Stephen Wright, *Alive to the Word*, pp. 158.
[83] Standing, *Finding the Plot*, pp. 118–19, 126–7, 130.
[84] Chapell, *Christ Centred Preaching*, pp. 44, 131–32, 143–44, 149–160, 169.
[85] Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, pp. 6–12, 78–79.
[86] Lowry, *Doing Time in the Pulpit*, pp. 15–16.

people's lives, particularly if application comes late in the process as it appears to in the majority of Chapell's models.[87]

The points-based sermon form originated in Greek rhetoric.[88] This structure was later developed in universities as a way of organising ideas and taken up after the Reformation as a way of preaching doctrine. This was later simplified into the three-point sermon.[89] There is nothing inherently Christian about preaching in points but neither is there anything inherently wrong with using a style of non-Christian and non-homiletic origin. Norrington denies that the non-Christian origins of the points structure precludes preachers from using it, but he cautions that methods can come with concomitant ideas that may not be positive. Norrington argues that the more interactive, conversational and personal approaches of Judaism, Jesus, and the Early Church may have been lost with the development of sermons based on Greek rhetoric.[90] Stephen Wright sees preaching is returning to earlier forms, with less emphasis on points and more emphasis on the form arising from the text. [91]

5.8 Ethical patience and low-key language

The revelatory plot foregrounds the characters in biblical narratives who should not be misused to make moral or spiritual points without engaging with them as people. If they become pegs for spiritual points to hang on, they become unreal, mere cyphers, and cyphers are difficult to relate to. The congregation needs to face the material reality of a situation and the personal and relational reality of the characters before making judgements; to use Michael Dyson's phrase, 'ethical patience' is needed. Ethical patience is an attitude that takes the trouble to stand alongside the characters and their situation before judging.[92] For the preacher, this attitude of ethical patience means using language that delays judgement, which signals a need to wait until the end of the narrative. Revelatory preaching's emphasis on good characterization and dealing in specifics can help communicate the reality of a character, their situation, and their relationships. Stereotyped characters lead to quick-fire judgements, which means people can distance themselves from certain

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[87] Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* pp. 57–66. Chapell, *Christ Centred Preaching*, pp. 218–24.
[88] Cahill, *The Shape of Preaching*, pp. 20.
[89] Stephen Wright, *Alive to the Word,* p. 165. O. Wesley Owen Allen Jr, *Determining the Form,* p. 3.
[90] Norrington, *To Preach or Not to Preach?,* pp. 4, 7, 9, 12–14, 22–24.
[91] Stephen Wright, *Alive to the Word*, pp. 164–65.
[92] Michael Eric Dyson, *Can You Hear Me Now?: The Inspiration, Wisdom and Insight of Michael Eric Dyson* (Philadelphia: Basic Civitas Books, 2011), p. 232.

characters in biblical narratives early in the sermon as it is made clear with whom the congregation is meant to align.

An instance of the need for ethical patience is the story of the making of the golden calf (Exodus 32:1–6). It is easy to censure the Israelites who made the golden calf but that is unlikely to resonate with people in any real sense as it is a situation outside the compass of modern western experience. We can condemn with impunity as it is unlikely to include us. Closer attention to the specifics of the situation changes things. The Israelites were in an unknown wilderness and Moses, on whom they relied for leadership, had been missing for days. They were geographically and emotionally beyond anything they knew. As slaves they had been controlled and suddenly, they are on their own; freedom of mind and spirit is not instantaneous, it does not happen as soon as the chains fall off. So great must have been the emotions experienced by those ex-slaves that they were willing to sacrifice the earrings given to them by the Egyptians, probably the first things of value they had ever owned. They needed a sense of control in a situation that was new, frightening and disorientating.[93] Taking the time to relate to the situation means the actions of the Israelites cease to feel distant and unreal, as most people know the panic of being in situations where they feel a lack of control and everything is new and scary. Many in the congregation may identify with the desire for a safe God, one who will bless us but not lead us into the wilderness. Although empathy is not right for every situation, often people need to come alongside characters before verdicts are uttered and before they can see the relevance to their own situation.

For believers, God is part of the real world and the Bible presents God and Jesus as the central characters in its overall story. However, in some stories God is not mentioned; Esther has no overt reference to God and in the Joseph saga God is silent. This does not present a problem for preaching as God is presented as deeply involved in human affairs throughout the Bible, and in the Gospels God is presented as incarnate in Jesus. This leads to an expectation of experiencing God through people and events, through creation and history. Generally, the everyday experience of God comes through the material world. The horizontal relationship with the world and its people contains within it the possibility of a 'vertical' relationship with God, an issue discussed in chapter seven. The rather relaxed position that some biblical

[93] Margaret Cooling, *Leaving Egypt and the Golden Calf: Biblical Bling*. Appendix 3.

narratives take on mentioning God is possible for narrators who take for granted the presence of God in the world and throughout history.

This low-key language used of God frees preachers to present situations and characters naturally. The actions of God can be magnified within a sermon, as Paul Scott Wilson suggests, but this should not be forced. The story of Joseph (Genesis 37, 38-50) does not have to be peppered with language of God's providence. It is doubtful that the teenage Joseph was calmly thinking 'this is all part of God's plan' whilst standing on a block in a marketplace being sold as a slave. To do so would not face up to the realities of his situation. God's actions can be magnified as the character looks back. Pastorally, situations peppered with the language of God — where the text does not warrant it — could leave a congregation feeling that their experience of God is not only different to that of biblical people but inferior.

5.9 Language styles, prologues and twice-told narratives

Language of all types tries to capture meaning, but each does it in its own way. Lyrical, analytical and explanatory language each have their own type of precision. Grief can be defined medically with all its aspects and stages.[94] Shakespeare's poetry on grief has a different form of precision; it captures its experiential impact. Both are accurate but in different ways.

CONSTANCE Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form;
Then, have I reason to be fond of grief?[95]

Poems do not aim for technical accuracy, but their type of precision echoes experience, William Blake, talking of anger in *A Poison Tree*, speaks of 'watering it in fears' an accurate description of how anger grows into hatred and acts as poison.[96]

Although revelatory preaching majors on lyrical language and poetic precision, preachers sometimes need the different precision of explanatory language. Explanatory language can be used but it needs delivering in the cadences of speech

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[94] William C. Sheil, *Grief*, Medicine Net <https://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=24274> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[95] William Shakespeare, *King John* <https://www.litcharts.com/shakescleare/shakespeare-translations/king-john/act-3-scene-4> [accessed 10 February 2021], III. 4. 96–102.
[96] William Blake, *A Poison Tree* <https://poets.org/poem/poison-tree> [accessed 10 February 2021].

rather than the points of a document. The explanatory and lyrical sections of a sermon can be separated with appropriate transitions, thereby allowing the two types of language to work together. Chapter four detailed how epilogues could be used to end a sermon; prologues are a means of beginning a sermon using more explanatory prose within an overall narrative form. An alternative is telling the story twice in different language styles, one explanatory, one reflective and more lyrical than the other.

5.9.1 Prologues

A prologue is a separate section that introduces a play. G.S. Bower describes some early modern prologues as telling the audience 'what they are going to see and what it is about'.[97] This has uncomfortable echoes of the old, and discredited, preaching adage, 'Tell them what you are going to say, tell them, then tell them what you have said.' Despite this echo, prologues should not be rejected as they can perform a number of significant roles. Several of Shakespeare's plays start with a prologue. The prologue to Romeo and Juliet tells the audience the back story, the location and what will happen. At first glance it looks like a 'spoiler', but the audience stays because the prologue does not ruin the play, it primes and orientates the audience. Shakespeare uses a technique that dates back to classical drama and is also found in the New Testament. John 1.1–18 is a prologue that gives the reader the cosmic spiritual context within which to understand the life of Jesus and his significance. The prologue tells the reader how to read the rest of the gospel. Holbert suggests something similar when he describes frame narratives that have an introduction and conclusion, which is not didactic nor moralising but focusses the narrative and enables the congregation to experience its significance.[98] Using a prologue and epilogue develops this insight.

A preaching prologue can orientate a congregation geographically, expressing where the story takes place. It can locate the story historically, stating when it takes place, and also locating it narratively showing where it fits, if it is part of a larger narrative. A prologue can situate a story culturally, introducing the congregation to the biblical world and it can set the tone emotionally. The prologue can bring the central issue to the forefront so that the congregation is primed theologically.

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[97] G. S. Bower, *A Study of the Prologue and Epilogue in English Literature from Shakespeare to Dryden* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench:1884 / Collingwood: Trieste Publishing, repr. 2017), pp. 2–4, 35.
[98] Holbert, *Preaching Old Testament*, pp. 43-44.

A prologue can key a congregation to listen in a particular way; it might ask the congregation to listen to the story of the anointing of David as God weaving human choices into the divine design. Prologues set the mental stage, create an atmosphere, and guide expectations. They can familiarise a congregation with the basic information they need to fully participate in the rest of the sermon. This is a response to the criticism, sometimes made of narrative preaching, that it only functions well with a congregation that has a good knowledge of the Bible. With a prologue, the preacher can supply information the congregation may lack, which leaves the preacher free to be creative in the rest of the sermon without breaking narrative mode to explain. In some sermons, having a brief narrative outline in the prologue can help a congregation navigate the rest of the sermon, which may be more detailed and less sequential. A different situation is the congregation that is well-informed biblically; they have heard it all before. A prologue can introduce a different slant on a story and defamiliarize it.

Transitioning from prologue to the main body of the sermon can be done in various ways. In a sermon on the Emmaus road the preacher may signal the change by a transition sentence such as, 'We can walk that road with two disciples.' There can also be a move in content, so that the subject of the end of the prologue leads into the subject that opens the main part of the sermon, as in the extract that follows.

When Christ returns, we can hope to hear his words, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' Until that day we live in a busy world, a world that needs lists. ***Pause***

We are a people of lists:
shopping lists,
to do lists,
urgent lists,
packing lists,
prayer lists
wish lists,
50 things to do before you die lists.[99]

There can be a move from the general nature of the prologue to the specific opening of the main body of the sermon as in this extract from a sermon on the Gadarene demoniac.

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[99] Margaret Cooling, *No One Knows the Hour of his Coming*: *Lists* <https://preachpreach.com/2018/10/12/no-one-knows-the-hour-of-his-coming-lists-2/> [accessed 10 February 2021].

> We can follow this man spiralling down from an ordinary citizen to the man Jesus met among the tombs. ***Pause***
>
> He was clothed, once;
> his garments woven by the women of the family,
> lovingly stitched.
> Now he is naked, his stringy frame unadorned,
> his skin bare to sun and wind. [100]

In whatever way the move is made, a short pause is usually needed when making the transition.

5.9.2 Twice-told narratives

Another way of using two styles of language in a sermon is the telling of the same story in two ways. This is found in the Bible, the most well-known examples being the parting of the sea (Exodus 14–15) and the defeat of Sisera (Judges 4–5) where the story is told in both prose and poetry.

In Exodus the prose account gives details of the flight of the Israelites before Pharaoh's troops and the parting of the sea. The second account puts it in a wider context where the battle is between God and Pharaoh. Stephen Binz described the poetry as interpreting the prose account in 'cosmic terms' and it is a celebration of God as deliverer, a belief that has wider meaning for Israel than this single event.[101] It is this role of deliverer that Brevard Childs highlights, for the Exodus pattern is threaded throughout the Bible. The song that follows the prose account is a response of faith to the events described in Exodus 14 and an interpretation of them. The tone of the song is praise but it is praise anchored in a specific event. The song does not follow the event in strict chronological order but the two chapters are intricately related and create one single theological narrative.[102] Much of the detail in the prose telling is omitted in the second and the second telling shifts the emphasis and tone. The simple statement of the drowning of Pharaoh's troops in Exodus 14:28 is retold

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[100] Margaret Cooling, *The Gadarene Demoniac: The Mathematics of Love* <https://preachpreach.com/2018/10/10/the-gadarene-demonic-the-mathematics-of-love/> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[101] Stephen J. Binz, *The God of Freedom and Life: A Commentary of the Book of Exodus* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993) <https://archive.org/details/godoffreedomli00binz> [accessed 15 February 2021], pp. 58-63.

[102] Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974) <https://archive.org/details/bookofexoduscrit0000chil> [accessed 15 February 2021], pp. 224-233, 248-253.

using vivid imagery: ‘they went down into the depths like a stone’ ‘they sank like lead’ ‘The earth swallowed them’ (Exodus 15: 5, 10, 12).

In Judges the twice-told narrative of the defeat of Sisera exhibits the characteristics of a double narrative. Although both forms tell the story, they do not both feature all aspects of the story. In the poetic version new elements are introduced, such as the anxiety of Sisera’s mother. Other aspects are omitted; there is no mention of years of oppression by the Canaanites.[103] The first telling details the oppression by the Canaanites, the second the choosing of ‘new gods’ and the failure of some tribes to join the battle. The poetic nature of the second telling puts the episode in a wider, cosmic, context with mountains quaking, the earth trembling and the stars joining in the battle. God is depicted as controlling nature in sending rain; ultimately, it is God’s intervention that is decisive.[104] The poetic telling has a different tone, most noticeable in the account of the death of Sisera. The prose version just says, ‘he died’ (Judges 4:21). The poetic has sensory detail, and the rhythm and repetition reinforce his death.

> He sank, he fell,
> He lay still at her feet;
> At her feet he sank, he fell;
> Where he sank, there he fell dead. (Judges 5:27)

A twice-told sermon draws on the biblical pattern. The story is told twice, but the first telling can be more explanatory. Not every detail in the first telling will be covered in the second. What is touched on in one may be more detailed in the other. The extract below is the opening of the first telling of a sermon on the conversion of Saul/Paul, it is more explanatory than the opening of the second telling.

Opening of the first telling

> It is 34 AD, or thereabouts, and several years have passed since the crucifixion of Jesus. In Jerusalem, the followers of Jesus are growing in number. Not everyone welcomes this new sect, some are indifferent, some opposed, some take the ‘wait and see’ option. The religious rulers of Israel, however, believe they can no longer tolerate this sect called ‘The Way’, for that is what they call the followers of Jesus. No one has used the word ‘Christian’ yet. The authorities have tried threats, arresting

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[103] Antony F. Campbell, *Joshua to Chronicles: An Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) <https://archive.org/details/joshuatochronicl0000camp> [accessed 15 February 2021], pp. 87-89.

[104] E. John Hamlin, *At Risk in the Promised Land: A Commentary of the Book of Judges* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) <https://archive.org/details/atriskinpromised0000haml> [accessed 15 February 2021], pp. 81-86.

> leaders, and telling them to keep quiet. That hasn't worked. Then it gets bloody. Stephen, a leader among the Christians, is arrested and condemned to death by stoning.

Opening of the second telling.

> Men range in a circle around the crouched figure of Stephen,
> arms raised, aiming stones at his body.
> Bones break under the rain of rocks,
> the best he can hope for is a merciful blow to the head.
> Yet the bloody mess that is Stephen prays for his persecutors.'[105]

The second telling is more specific, has more sensory detail and is more lyrical. It focusses on the characters, whereas the first telling gave the general context in which to understand what was happening to the characters.

5.10 **Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to consider the relationship between language and reality, a crucial issue for revelatory preaching that aims to display the realities present in the text in order to engage with the realities of Christian living. It explored critical realism as a philosophical standpoint that can give preachers confidence in their ability to know reality without assuming a simple and direct correspondence. This provides the framework for a real but complex relationship between language and reality. This chapter has also sought to demonstrate the way in which some forms of language can facilitate communicating narrative reality in the oral form of the sermon while maintaining its invitational style. The result is an approach distinguished by language use that is vivid, earthed and characterized by figurative imagery rooted in the world. A lyrical language style and language that has deep connections to the senses was explored and ways of using language that chimed with experience. The aim was to create an approach that engaged head and heart, where small linguistic touches keep Christ's humanity and that of biblical characters before the congregation and enabled people to recognize the text and the truths it contains as relevant.

The following chapter explores a hermeneutic suitable for revelatory preaching and how various forms of interpretation relate to reality. It will consider speech-act theory and cause and effect, for a hermeneutic appropriate for revelatory preaching

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[105] Margaret Cooling, *The Conversion of Saul-Paul: From Human Certainties to Divine Assurance* <https://preachpreach.com/2018/10/12/the-conversion-of-saul-paul-from-human-certainties-to-divine-assurance/> [accessed 10 February 2021].

needs to engage with ways in which change in the world happens through speech. Preaching is not an exercise in oratory for its own sake, but language that has an effect in the world.

Chapter Six
Responses to the Challenges Raised by Hermeneutics

The purpose of this chapter is to respond to issues of interpretation relating to textual and visual narratives raised by the first four chapters. To this end I discuss the roles of author, text and reader and parallel these with artist, artwork and viewer. The intention is to develop a cooperative hermeneutic where the three foci of authority create an arena where meaning is explored and where a hermeneutic hospitable to a systematically embodied approach is developed. As part of delivering these aims, I consider the role of cause and effect and speech-act theory they are concerned with the effects of speech in the world and what words do. They relate to the ways in which meaning is enacted in life. Meaning is not severed from reality.

In order to develop an appropriate hermeneutic, this section considers a number of realities involved in interpretation: an original situation that the narrative may reflect, the author/artist's reality, the narrative/artwork reality, and the reality of the reader/hearer/viewer. How these realities relate and what control they exert over meaning has consequences for interpretation and relevance. To this end the freedom of the artist as interpreter and the freedom of the reader as interpreter is discussed and how this relates to preaching.

Of the three key words that describe the revelatory approach (embodied, relevant and invitational) it is relevance that is the main focus of this chapter, although embodiment is reflected in the role given to the historical situation and the way in which meaning is embodied in the text. The approach's invitational nature is also pertinent to this subject as an invitational approach can only be preserved by a hermeneutic that involves the reader. What follows is not a detailed account of hermeneutics or a history of interpretation. Where historical perspectives are mentioned, they are there to show how the focus of hermeneutics has changed over time.

6.1 Reality and interpretation

A revelatory approach sees biblical narrative as reflecting people and events in some way, where the text indicates this. Christianity is a historical religion and Greidanus is clear that the authority of the Bible depends on the reality of certain historical events proclaimed in the text. Historical details, such as the exact timing of Jesus'

crucifixion, may not be clear but that he was crucified is important.[1] The biblical texts disclose a deity involved in history and interacting with the material world, ultimately becoming part of it in the incarnation. For a historical faith, the relationship of meaning to reality matters. I link this to a critical realist approach; if texts reflect an underlying reality in some way, then there will be a constraint on interpretation exercised by that reality. Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer, in their paper on critical realism and semiosis, highlight the relationship between interpretation and questions of truth and reference to reality. A critical realist approach to hermeneutics interprets texts in terms of their relationship to the social and material world, meaning is not divorced from reality.[2] This is a crucial relationship for it gives hermeneutics an anchor in the world.

Hermeneutical frameworks used to interpret texts have varying relationships to reality. Christopher Wright, when discussing hermeneutical frameworks, likens the relationship to maps. Any two-dimensional world map distorts the three-dimensional world and all maps are incomplete, for not everything can be represented. Each type of map includes only what is relevant to its use. The London underground map relates to the reality of the Tube but not to the geography of London. This does not make the Tube map inaccurate; it is accurate for its purpose.[3] A critical realist framework for understanding language does not assume a one-to-one reference, which does not mean it abandons reference. Texts and artworks can relate to reality in various ways. A critical realist framework allows for a flexible relationship between texts and reality. Whatever hermeneutical view people adopt, a relationship to reality is involved, for people use their experience of the world to interpret texts and fill in gaps. Sanford draws attention to how readers and hearers mentally search for a scenario from life that relates to what they are reading/hearing and that enables prediction and understanding. Courtroom language allows people to infer what may follow.[4] Conversely, unusual scenarios have the potential to slow down processing and halt predictable responses. This practical observation has consequences for revelatory preaching whose scenic aspect can use the

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[1] Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text,* p. 92.
[2] Norman Fairclough, Bob Jessop, and Andrew Sayer, 'Critical Realism and Semiosis', *Alethia,* 5.1 (2002), 2–10 <https://doi.org/10.1558/aleth.v5i1.2> (pp. 4–5).
[3] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), pp. 68–69.
[4] Sanford, *Mind, Brain and Narrative*, pp. 20–24.

congregation's ability to predict. Predictable responses can also be averted by starting with an unusual scene for familiar Bible stories.

Real-world reference does not mean that every text will have a single meaning; preachers still have to wrestle with the possible interpretations of a text but that does not mean an inability to choose between interpretations. Elgin's 'tenable interpretations' gives preachers a means of deciding between interpretations that is beyond personal preference. She rescues people from the binary response of relativism or absolutism, defining tenable interpretations as those that yield deeper understanding. There can be more than one interpretation of a text or artwork and more than one may be correct, but some will not be. Everything is not just a matter of opinion. There may not be certainty but some interpretations are grounded in cognitive skills and 'considered judgements' and there are interpretations that yield more understanding than others.[5] For believers, what makes an interpretation tenable is its relationship to the overarching story of the Bible and the gospel as rendered by Scripture.

6.2 The narrative world and the real world

A revelatory approach focusses on the world of the text and the realities it reflects. Engagement with narrative realities in the act of interpretation involves an interplay between real world reference and the narrative world. The nature of that interplay will depend on genre. Biblical books with historical import, such as Chronicles, the Gospels and Acts, will have more of an interplay than psalms and apocalyptic literature. Greidanus notes that biblical narratives offer interpretations of historical events, but he distinguishes between history writing and historical events, they are not the same. The events narrated have some foundation in historical reality as appropriate for the nature of the text, bearing in mind that a historical foundation is primary for some and secondary for others. Those books that do claim historical reference are not written to modern historical criteria as their primary aim is theological, but this does not make them unreliable. Luke emphasizes his concern for accurate recording (Luke 1:1–3). Preachers can engage with the realities of a narrative in terms of its culture and context. Greidanus sees this as seeking to understand a text in its own time and place, seeking to hear a text as it might have been heard originally without a simplistic claim to have access to events exactly as

[5] Elgin, *Between the Absolute and the Arbitrary*, pp. 23, 194.

they happened.[6] Accepting variation in relationships to reality means the preacher does not come with a blanket assumption but makes a judgement in light of each text. In the creation of a living text and its honing into a presentation there is a re-presenting to enable a hearing that may have some of the original power.

Anthony Thiselton, in his survey of hermeneutics, contrasts historical and ahistorical interpretations; both have been present since the Early Church, which avoids a simplistic labelling of an ahistorical approach as a modern divergence from a more literal early style. In more recent history, Schleiermacher asserted that the grounding of the New Testament in time and place needed a historical interpretation to do it justice, whereas Rudolph Bultmann separated faith and history, and saw little value in history for interpretation.[7] Between a naive total correspondence and an ahistorical position stands a nuanced approach appropriate to a critical realist stance and a revelatory approach where the relationship to historical reality may sometimes be a ‘loose fit’ but reference is maintained.

6.3 Cause and effect and reality

Some approaches to hermeneutics reject causal explanation as part of interpretation, but this tends to be a rejection of rigid causal relationships where cause A results in effect B. Such regularities do not exist in the complexities of relationships and situations reflected in narratives. Critical realism affirms the reality behind observable effects even if we cannot have direct access to causes. The link with reality is important for hermeneutics, for bodies enact meaning in in the world. A revelatory approach needs a flexible position on casual relationships as it uses diverse forms of cause and effect that can be complex, layered and subtle, but do result in effects, although they may be difficult to track. Words are causes that can have effects in the real world, this is the completion of interpretation by enactment. In order to do this, words must have meaning that relates to reality. Preachers hope that sermons, regardless of the style, have effects in people’s lives; those effects may be a change in thinking, feeling, being or acting.

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[6] Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, pp. 80–81, 86–87, 91–93.

[7] Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 4, 104-14, 131–2, 153–54, 168–69, 193, 240–41.

6.4 Multiple functions and speech-act theory

Texts need to mean something in order to bring about change in people and in the world, the act of completion in hermeneutics. However, meaning cannot be reduced to the cognitive alone; interpretation needs an affective dimension as that often drives change and produces effects. Communicating meaning is not language's sole function, neither is it just meant to describe the world. The primary role of language is not to mirror the world but to do things. A mirror is passive, language is active. The language in texts does things, it commands, persuades, moves and corrects. These multiple roles of language are reflected in the Bible, II Timothy 3:16 describes Scripture as teaching, correcting and training. Nelson Goodman maintains similar plural functions for art, but these functions still have reference.[8] In language, speech-act theory gives due weight to the different roles language plays.

Speech-act theory focuses on what words do without jettisoning reference. J. L. Austin's speech-act theory maintains that statements go beyond being descriptions of situations and facts; language does things and has effects in the world. Words can have an illocutionary role, they perform an action, they do something and have an effect in reality. Words can have a locutionary role, they mean something. Locutionary words may describe or report; they are words with reference in some form. Words can also have a perlocutionary role, persuasive intent, these are words with an emphasis on consequences; it is the language of convincing and persuading. All three aspects of language have effects in the world.[9]

Eugene Botha stresses that speech act theory highlights the interchange between hearer and speaker, words are not neutral, people do things with words that create a response. Words can stir people to act, they can promise and direct; words can express thanks and regret, pass sentence and confer blessing.[10] Speech act theory is a helpful reminder that the biblical text reflects an oral/aural culture where language was active; it moves the focus on language from what is sometimes an inward-looking position to its active roles. This is pertinent for the preaching context, which is also oral/aural in nature and where language is active in many of its roles.

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[8] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, p. 256.
[9] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. by J. O. Urmson (London: Oxford University Press, 1962) <https://archive.org/details/HowToDoThingsWithWordsAUSTIN/mode/2up> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 98–107. Internet Archive ebook.
[10] J. Eugene Botha, 'Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation', *Neotestamentica,* 41.2 (2007), 274–94 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43048637?seq=1> [accessed 10 February 2021] (pp. 275–278, 281).

Revelatory preaching uses many of the different functions of language, it is not restricted to the explanatory role of what words mean. There is an emphasis on relevance and the implications of a narrative for living, the enactment of meaning. Critical realism, speech-act theory and the revelatory plot between them create a subtle and varied relationship between language and reality.

The maintaining of reference in hermeneutics offers both constraint and opportunity. It admits a degree of polyvalence where appropriate, but constraints are exercised by insisting that language has some reference to reality; words cannot mean anything. A real-world reference also offers hermeneutics the possibility of ongoing effects in terms of practise in the world. Biblical texts were intended to have effects and change the way people interact with God, others and their environment. The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) may be the only text that actually says, 'Go and do likewise' but such injunctions, implied or explicit, are found throughout the Bible.

6.5 Author, text and reader

A revelatory and critical realist approach to hermeneutics has consequences for the roles of different agents and their authority in interpretation. In textual hermeneutics the three agents — or sources of authority — are author, text and reader. In each case there arises the issue of how the agent relates to external reality. In the section that follows I briefly trace the different ways in which each agent and their relationship to reality has been understood and what that relationship may be in terms of a revelatory approach.

6.5.1 Author

Revelatory preaching does not attempt to get behind a text to the author's reality, which could be very different to the narrative reality. Nevertheless, it does accept author guidance in unfolding a narrative to create a living text. Before the twentieth century the interpretive emphasis was on probing behind the text to access the author's intention and their world; the author's reality was the goal. Thiselton traces this emphasis back to the Antiochene school of the Early Church, which focussed on literal meaning, the author and their situation. Authorial control dominated in terms of the meaning of a text. Calvin talked of laying bare the mind of the author and

Friedrich Schleiermacher spoke of stepping into the author's frame of reference.[11] For much of Christian history authorial intent and the author's world was the deciding influence in Christian interpretation. However, authorial intent was questioned by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley who cast doubt on the interpreter's ability to know the authorial mind and whether this was even desirable. Wimsatt and Beardsley's work was based on poetry, but their insights were applied to other texts and art. They describe a poem as 'detached from the author at birth' and making its way in the world on its own.[12] Roland Barthes went further and announced that the author 'enters his own death' when he writes.[13] The reign of the author was over.

Wimsatt and Beardsley's work was a helpful corrective to an approach that conceded too much to the author. To give authorial intent all the power consigns the text to being a passive container of meaning, leaving the reader and the text inactive, which would not suit an invitational approach. Attempts to get behind the text to the author's reality is a task fraught with difficulty. If authorial intent alone is seen as authoritative, past reality dominates and it can be difficult to engage with present reality. Authorial intent cannot be fully known, and the author may have unconsciously included much that was not intended. Some passages contain depths of meaning not envisaged by the author. Thiselton cites the suffering servant poems as an example of more being present in a passage than was intended by the author. He uses the term 'author direction' rather than author intent.[14] Thiselton's term is liberating, for it frees the preacher to acknowledge the role of the author in offering some guidance in interpretation without conceding all power to them. The preacher can follow the author's signals in the text that indicate how it is to be read. This acknowledges a role for the author and allows interaction between past and present realities, without assuming knowledge of the author's mind.

Kevin Vanhoozer describes acknowledging direction from the author as a homiletic virtue. That does not mean unthinking obedience to perceived direction, but a willingness to read in the way the author directs.[15] If author direction is

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[11] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, pp. 4, 6, 20–21, 109.
[12] W. K. Wimsatt Jr., and M. C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy', *The Sewanee Review,* 54.3 (1946), 468–88 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27537676?seq=1> [accessed 10 February 2021] (pp. 468, 470).
[13] Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author,* trans. by Richard Howard (1967) <https://writing.upenn.edu/~taransky/Barthes.pdf> [accessed 10 February 2021], p. 6.
[14] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics,* p. 27.
[15] Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?: The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), p. 377.

accepted, the reader has clues concerning how to fill in gaps in the narrative appropriately without assuming that authorial direction exhausts meaning. The revelatory approach takes the author's reality seriously as part of how to unfold a narrative.

6.5.2 Text

Revelatory preaching sees the text as referring to an external reality, an original situation in some way (where indicated by the text) and that provides some constraints on interpretation. Thiselton traces a series of developments within hermeneutics that exhibit an increasing focus on the text and growing textual isolation as meaning became deferred, fragmented, and dislocated from reality. He cites the new hermeneutics that moved the focus to the 'rights of the text' but with little relationship to history. The structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure saw texts generating meaning without recourse to external factors and with Derrida and Barthes meaning became arbitrary and 'postponed'.[16]

Acknowledging 'the rights of the text' is to be applauded, for it brings the text into play in interpretation rather than giving the author sole rights in that domain. However, the way in which the focus on the text developed tended to rob the text of stability concerning meaning. Textual fragmentation, isolation and arbitrary or deferred meaning make real-world reference hard to achieve in interpretation. Although there may be no single sense of a text there does not have to be textual anarchy. A text, like a musical score, can have a number of interpretations but ultimately the score exercises control concerning the range of credible interpretations. Vanhoozer's approach is similar to critical realism, he calls his attitude 'interpretive and ethical' realism; it is an approach that engenders respect, for there is something 'real' or 'other' to respect. The text is not free to be manipulated for any purpose. The text is not treated as an object but a presence with its own voice.[17]

Some biblical texts are not primarily earthed in tangible physical realities, though they may relate to social and religious realities in terms of relationships with others and God. Biblical poems are often about personal feelings and the poet's relationship with God. However, this is not always the case. Thiselton notes that the

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[16] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, pp. 194–195, 201–02.
[17] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?,* pp. 372–76.

servant songs are not referent free; they have two referents in Israel and Jesus.[18] The Psalms are poetic in nature but that does not prevent them referring to specific situations such as illness or injustice (Psalms 41 and 58).

Brevard Childs is difficult to place; his emphasis is on the text as a whole and its meaning is expressed within the canonical context, which gives it theological continuity. Interpretive authority comes from within the canon and the emphasis is on internal theological influences concerning meaning. Childs rejects appeals to outside ideology such as a Marxist's interpretive framework. His focus is not on independent texts as units of meaning but their place within the whole. There is an openness about the biblical text that allows for in an overall intratextuality, giving a single narrative of God's redemptive actions, without eliminating differences or the separate identities of the two testaments. Texts are reinterpreted from within the Bible narrative.[19] An illustration of this is the way the New Testament reinterprets the Exodus, seeing the Exodus pattern in the work of Christ. This is evidenced in references to deliverance from slavery to sin and freedom in Christ (Romans 6:17–18).

Dale Brueggemann stresses the role Child's gives to the text in the form of the canon. He asserts that, 'The only context that counts for Childs is the canonical context. Neither the historical context of the original writer or audience nor that of their redactors or their readers has authority for determining the meaning of the text.' In this view texts do not carry 'excess baggage' such as authorial intent or historical meaning.[20] This would place Brevard Childs's canonical approach in this section as he gives priority to the final textual form and how the text functions within the canon, rather than authorial direction or the effect on the reader. Walter Brueggemann's judgement is more nuanced, he describes Childs's approach to texts as 'no longer connected in a *primary* [my italics] way to their historical roots'. And he acknowledges that the relationship between the historical and canonical is complex for Childs and unresolved.[21]

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[18] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics,* pp. 335.

[19] Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 71–79.

[20] Dale A. Brueggemann, 'Brevard Childs' Canon Criticism: An Example of Post-Critical Naiveté', *JETS,* 32.3 (1989), 311–26 <https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/32/32-3/32-3-pp311-326_JETS.pdf> [accessed 10 February 2021] (pp. 316–17, 321, 323).

[21] Walter Brueggemann, 'The Bible and Scripture: A Review of *Isaiah* by Brevard Childs', *The Christian Century*, (2001), 22–26 <http://www.religion-online.org/article/the-bible-as-scripture/> [accessed 10 February 2021] (para. 9 and 18 of 30).

An autonomous text detached from external realities does not work with a critical realist approach or with revelatory preaching, for it brackets out history and its material and social realities. If a text is taken solely at a language level, without engaging either authorial direction or reader-response, it becomes a sealed unit leaving the reader and author passive, ignoring their perspectives on reality. An approach that isolates the text from reality is not appropriate for Christianity, which is a historical religion. A revelatory approach chimes with this historical aspect of Christianity.

6.5.3 Reader/hearer

Revelatory preaching's concern for the reader/hearer is not immediately obvious, however, the detailing of characters and situations are executed in a style and at a scale and pace that enables readers/hearers to relate to the biblical characters and situations and identify their relevance. The invitational nature of the revelatory approach, expressed in ambiguities and its openness, invites hearer participation. Concern for the reader/hearer and their response is not new. Thiselton identifies the roots of concern for the reader in the Alexandrian school of the Early Church that developed interpretive methods, often allegorical, that focused on the impact of texts in people's lives.[22] The perspective of the reader/hearer reflects their realities. Some biblical texts, such as Jesus' parables, invite reader-response. The reader/hearer is not just the passive recipient of the text; they have an active role to play but the nature of that role divides opinion. The idea that people bring something to the text was often viewed in a negative light, as eisegesis, the reading in of personal bias. Hans-Georg Gadamer, however, perceived fore-meanings or presuppositions as a natural part of interpretation, 'all understanding inevitably involves some prejudices.' Presuppositions do not have to remain unquestioned and need not be negative. Gadamer blames the Enlightenment for giving prejudice its negative sense, he saw the Enlightenment as 'prejudice against prejudice'. He understood that people are always situated in traditions and bring their understandings to a text. Interpretation involves people being aware of their prejudices and expectations as no one can enter into interpretation from a neutral stance. However, the reader/hearer needs to be open to having expectations and preconceived ideas confirmed or disrupted.[23] This

[22] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics,* p. 4.
[23] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd edn trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1982) <https://archive.org/details/truthmethod0002edgada> [accessed 22 February 2021], pp. 267–274, 278,

recognition of preconceptions, alongside an openness to challenge, is a more realistic stance for a congregation, for congregants' preconceptions come into play as soon as they hear a reading. The sermon can both use and acknowledge common preconceptions and challenge them where necessary.

Thiselton traces the growing focus on the response of the reader from Roman Ingarden to Stanley Fish. Ingarden noted the open-ended nature of many texts and laid the foundations for the active role of the reader in filling in gaps and completing the text. Reader-response theory was developed by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. Robert Crosman went further, contending that readers should not be constrained by the text. Stanley Fish developed a radical reader-response theory, asserting that there is nothing in the text for readers to interpret there are only interpretations; the readers' response becomes the meaning. Radical reader-response can mean that the reader finds what they want in a text or, in Norman Holland terms, the text is transformed into wish fulfilment.[24] This leaves the text unable to challenge the reader, whereas the Bible purports to be a challenging force (II Timothy 3:16).
In radical reader-response approaches the realities of text and author direction do not control the reader's interpretation. A revelatory approach acknowledges roles for reader/hearers in filling in gaps, exploring possibilities and engaging with the biblical people and situation imaginatively and cognitively. Readers can have an active role without adopting a radical reader-response approach.

It is difficult to know where to place Childs's canonical approach. He could inhabit this section as he does show some concern for readers and how they, as part of the believing community, receive the text. His description of reception is of an active process. 'There is no one hermeneutical key for unlocking the biblical message, but the canon provides the arena in which the struggle for understanding takes place.'[25] It is the Christian community that interprets the text in the light of practice and under the guidance of the Spirit. Individual reading is not enough.

Thiselton's own perspective in hermeneutics leaves the reader active but open to challenge from other realities. He draws on Gadamer's horizons and their role in creating understanding. To the horizons of the past (text) and the present (the reader) Thiselton adds a future horizon of promise, the eschatological horizon. These horizons come together to broaden and transform reader horizons and understanding,

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282–283.

[24] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics,* pp. 30–31, 251, 330–33, 65, 617–19.

[25] Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London, SCM Press, 1985), p. 15.

creating new horizons. Readers bring their expectations to a text; these ‘horizons of expectation’ are not just individual but formed in community. The expectations, practices and assumptions that make up a person or community’s horizon may be conscious, or readers may be unaware of what they bring to a text. The text can affirm or shatter expectations. The shattering of expectations is a salient feature of the New Testament; Jesus’ teaching declared the first will be last and the last, first and the greatest is the one who serves (Mark 10: 31, 44). The parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16) and the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12) are unlikely to fulfil reader expectations as justice is overtaken by grace. The cross itself is the ultimate shattering of expectations and appears as folly (I Corinthians 1:18, 23-24).[26] Fusion of horizons is not the text becoming a reflection of the reader’s views, for if this happens otherness ceases to exist, and the reader’s expectations and view of reality remain unquestioned.

A revelatory approach takes account of the readers’ role without conceding all power to them, which could result in endless interpretations. A radical reader-response approach insulates readers from any challenge from another culture or time and another view of reality. If readers can make what they want of a text, both the text and author become inactive.

6.5.4 A cooperative hermeneutic

What I designate as a ‘cooperative hermeneutic’ engages author, text, and reader in interpretation; it is three agents held in tension, their realities interacting. Cooperative hermeneutics brings all three agents together and acknowledges the rights of all three. The Bible as primary witness holds principal position but all three centres of authority cooperate, though the emphasis may shift depending on the type of text to be interpreted. It is, however, a matter of changing emphasis not a denial of the role of any particular agent. Interpreters need to give each agent their due.

A cooperative hermeneutic is compatible with a critical realist stance as it allows for a range of possible interpretations as texts vary in their degree of openness and in the way they relate to reality. Interpretations can vary without implying relativism. Kevin Bradt, referring to the well-known duck-rabbit image, states that, ‘reality is not *in* the lines of the diagram. It exists rather in the dialogue between mind and perception.’ The mind interprets the image but the reality of the image does

[26] Antony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 33–35, 44–46, 65, 617–19.

not change regardless of whether one sees a duck or a rabbit.[27] This is true if taken to mean that an image can have more than one interpretation, in the case of the duck-rabbit image there are two credible alternatives. To take this further and see meaning as constructed by the mind apart from reality is not congruent with a critical realist position or the duck-rabbit example. Reality imposes limits concerning credible alternatives; it is a bounded plurality, which suits a revelatory approach.

The meaning and significance of a text is developed within boundaries that are signalled by different aspects of the text, its author, and readers. The signals mark out the parameters and create an arena, within which meaning and significance is developed. This position acknowledges some slippage in language, the incompleteness of knowledge and the positioned nature of reading but it also recognizes the degree of stability that can ensue from a hermeneutic that takes relating to reality seriously.

Vanhoozer's approach is compatible with a critical realist stance and a revelatory approach. He accepts that the different genres of text will affect interpretation as the genres engage with reality in diverse ways, and he asserts that no one culture or system of interpretation can exhaust a text's meaning. Vanhoozer advocates a single meaning for texts but multiple significances and he accepts that there are many ways of describing a text and 'the best explanation or description of a text may be multifaceted or plural.' In practice, it may be difficult to delineate meaning and significance, interpretation is not a linear process, significance has a role to play in deciding meaning.[28]

The debate concerning agents raises the issue of whether meaning is discovered, constructed or developed. The word *discover* suggests that all authority lies with the author and text and all the reader has to do is find it, leaving the reader passive and ignoring their reality. The word 'construct' puts all the emphasis onto the reader and their reality, leaving the text and author passive. This thesis uses the term *develop* that has elements of both discover and construct. It acknowledges some authorial direction and a role for textual expression to guide the reader and decide the trajectory of interpretation. The reader develops meanings and significances in cooperation with the author and text. The reader's context will affect what they see, but the text and author maintain their otherness in order to offer a challenge to readers.

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[27] Kevin M. Bradt, *Story as a Way of Knowing* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997), p. 42.
[28] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?,* pp. 416–419, 424–25.

6.6 Attitudes and virtues

Revelatory preaching emphasizes the reality of biblical people and situations and by its style and composition it can enable voices from another culture and time to speak through a text. God can speak through those situations and people. This premise has implications concerning attitudes that are needed to enable listening and receiving those voices.

Richard Briggs and Kevin Vanhoozer both talk in terms of interpretive virtues. Briggs highlights the patience and receptivity needed in paying attention to the specifics of a text. This means following where the text leads even if some of the specifics are strange. Judgement needs to be held in check long enough to consider the challenge inherent in the text. Briggs calls this ‘holding ones nerve’ before a text. Briggs and Vanhoozer cite openness, honesty, attentiveness, responsibility, respect, conviction, wisdom and obedience as hermeneutic virtues, but the prime virtue is humility. These virtues are the dispositions a reader brings to a text in order to reduce distancing from it. It does not mean coming to the text without any convictions, it is about how those convictions are held. Is the reader open to having their presuppositions challenged and considering different ideas? Hermeneutical virtue is being willing to sit under a text rather than over it. This is not abdicating the work of thinking but deciding the attitude with which readers think. Humility does not mean rejecting the critical tradition; humility is exercised in conjunction with other interpretive virtues such as wisdom and trust. Humility leads to a desire to do justice to the text; it is an attitude of patient attention and appropriate trust that has enough confidence to allow suspicion to be voiced. Trust is not credulity. Framing all these interpretive virtues is love of God and neighbour.[29]

The work of Briggs and Vanhoozer navigates a position between a radical and a simplistic approach and enables preachers to adopt appropriate critical approaches while respecting the integrity of the text. This attitude can accommodate Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic of suspicion concerning interpreters’ own interests that can distort interpretation. A hermeneutic of suspicion also alerts readers to interests hidden within the text. The exposing of realities in revelatory preaching can expose social structures and power relationships within a narrative. Ricoeur balances

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[29] Richard S. Briggs, The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), pp. 19–21, 46, 63–66, 71–3, 100–01, 104–5, 127, 140–141, 187–90. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?,* pp. 373–77, 383, 386, 395, 462–68.

suspicion with a hermeneutic of restoration of meaning. Suspicion is tempered by openness and listening. Ricoeur acknowledges that understanding is necessary for belief, and belief is needed for understanding. He describes a double motivation, 'Willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigour, vow of obedience'.[30] Thiselton observes that Ricoeur's hermeneutic of suspicion does not have to be negative, it can be a recognition of the distorting effects of sin, it can enable a hearing of the text. Positions such as Ricoeur's recognize that no one comes to a text as a tabula rasa, interpreters bring their presuppositions and pre-understandings with them. These can be positive, giving the preacher as an interpreter a starting point. Preunderstandings may be challenged or affirmed.[31]

Ricoeur's three-stage hermeneutical arc, of naiveté, criticism and second naiveté, also requires a range of attitudes that can encourage listening to voices in the text. Although the stages are named separately, there is a degree of overlap. Naiveté is a pre-critical stage where the text is accepted at face value, the second stage is critical and interpretive. The final post-critical stage is a second naiveté, which is a return to the narrative as a whole but with greater depth. It is the critical and interpretive middle stage that allows the reader 'to hear again'.[32] Dan Stiver, commenting on Ricoeur's stages, describes them in terms of attitudes. The first naiveté is 'an innocent act of understanding'. The reader is 'seized' by the narrative and control is not with the reader. This stage is a first 'guess' concerning meaning taking the narrative as a whole. In the middle stage the reader tests the initial understanding through explanation and critical approaches. In the second naiveté the reader returns to the narrative as a whole with a deeper understanding and explores its meaning and import, which may lead to appropriation and application. For Ricoeur, explanation and meaning are not enough.[33] Ricoeur's three staged arc can work with a revelatory form where the initial immersion is followed by critical engagement with scholars, only to return to the narrative in a deeper way in the final form.

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[30] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, *the Terry Lectures*, trans. by Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) <https://archive.org/details/RICOEURPaulFreudAndPhilosophyEssayOnInterpretation/page/n34/mode/1up> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 9, 27–29, 56. Internet Archive ebook.

[31] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics,* pp. 10, 12, 233.

[32] Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil,* trans. by Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) <https://archive.org/details/RICOEURPaulFreudAndPhilosophyEssayOnInterpretation/mode/1up> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 351–354. Internet Archive ebook.

[33] Dan R. Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 57–64.

6.7 Visual hermeneutics

Throughout this thesis I have suggested art as a potential model and source for the revelatory plot, it also has its role to play in hermeneutics. Increasingly art is used to interpret texts as art resources, such as *The Visual Commentary,* become available. Cheryl Exum and Ela Nutu stress that visual hermeneutics is not about looking at an artwork after reading a text in order to judge if the artist interpreted it correctly.[34] In many respects visual hermeneutics has undergone a development similar to textual hermeneutics and the role of the artist, artwork and viewer parallels that of the author, text and reader. As noted in chapter three, art's role in hermeneutics has a long history. The nature of monoscenic, synoptic and simultaneous art may be the outworking of art's hermeneutical role.

Thiselton, in his survey of thinking around images, emphasizes the interpretive framework people bring to art. People use their assumptions, previous experience and beliefs to make sense of an artwork, but frameworks can be inappropriate. Initial 'at a glance' appropriation of a painting by a single person is not sufficient to provide a rounded understanding. The meaning of an image is not necessarily clear. Context, tradition and training come into play and time is needed to reflect on the truth or falsehood of an image.[35]

Martin O'Kane, drawing on Gadamer's work, denies that hermeneutical aesthetics is reduced to the subjective, the viewer can be taken beyond their own horizons.[36] Nicholas Davey observes how art can transform understanding, but it does this in its own way. Ideas are experienced concretely and subjectively but that does not make the ideas themselves either private or subjective. Ideas can be felt in art, but it is not a purely affective experience; there is discourse and dialogue in a way that is similar to language. Art may not be pure thought, but neither is it just material; thought is integral to perception. There can be 'an epiphany of ideas'.[37] Davey and O'Kane's work can take the preacher beyond a superficial use of art to an interpretive engagement.

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[34] J. Cheryl Exum and Ela Nutu, 'Introduction', in *Between the Text and the Canvas: The Bible and Art in Dialogue*, ed. by J. Cheryl Exum and Ela Nutu, Bible in the Modern World, 13 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), pp.1–38 (p. 1).

[35] Thiselton, *The Power of Pictures*, pp. 25, 29-33.

[36] Martin O'Kane, *Painting the Text: The Artist as Biblical Interpreter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007)*,* pp. 38–39.

[37] Nicholas Davey, 'The Hermeneutics of Seeing', in *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual,* ed. by Ian Heywood, and Barry Sandywell (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 3–29 (pp. 3, 10, 12–15).

6.7.1 Artistic freedom

There remains the question of how creative artists can be in their interpretation of a narrative. David Brown allows for development and 'creative reworking' of the text by artists.[38] Sometimes an artist's reading will be against the grain of the text. Michelangelo's depiction of Jesus as Judge in the Sistine chapel paints him in classical Roman style, whereas the biblical text presents Jesus as Jewish.[39] Regrettably, artists lost an earlier freedom when new restrictions on art were imposed during the Counter Reformation after the Council of Trent (1545–63).[40] Paolo Veronese's *Last Supper* was deemed to have overstepped the bounds of appropriate interpretation and he was summoned before the Inquisition. Veronese refused to comply with their suggestions for change, instead he changed the title to *Feast at the House of Levi*.[41]

Artists do not just present physical realities, they display social, ethical and spiritual realities through the physical. Botticelli in his *Adoration of the Magi* places the Christ child in the centre of the painting, above the Magi and their attendants. The composition directs the viewers' eyes to the Holy Family who rest on a solid rock but surrounded by ruins. The focus is Christ as the centre of worship whose reign is more enduring than earthly empires.[42] Andrea Mantegna does the opposite; he removes all background and focusses on the faces, on the personal, and on the psychological and spiritual realities in his *Adoration of the Magi*.[43]

Paolo Berdini affirms that painting has an active relationship with the text. Firstly, artists go beyond the text as they must clothe people, give them expressions and paint a background, none of which the Bible may detail. Secondly, the artist

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38 David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, p. 92.

39 Michelangelo, *The Last Judgement*, fresco, 1537–1541, 13.7 × 122 m Sistine Chapel, Vatican City <https://www.michelangelo.org/the-last-judgement.jsp> [accessed 10 February 2021].

40 The Council of Trent, *New Rules for Religious Art* <https://algrimes2014.wordpress.com/2014/06/24/the-council-of-trent-and-the-new-rules-for-religious-art/> [accessed 10 February 2021].

41 Veronese, *The Feast in the House of Levi*, 1573, oil on canvas, 555 × 1280 cm, Gallerie dell' Accademia, Venice <https://www.wga.hu/html_m/v/veronese/06/8levi.html> [accessed 10 February 2021]. The Khan Academy, *Transcript of the Trial of Veronese*, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/high-ren-florence-rome/late-renaissance-venice/a/transcript-of-the-trial-of-veronese> [accessed 10 February 2021].

42 Sandro Botticelli, *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1475, tempera, 111 × 134 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence <https://www.virtualuffizi.com/the-adoration-of-the-magi-by-botticelli%3A-an-artwork-full-of-innovation.html> [accessed 10 February 2021].

43 Andrea Mantegna, *Adoration of the Magi,* 1495–1505, distemper on linen, 55 × 71 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles <https://www.wga.hu/html_m/m/mantegna/09/95magi.html> [accessed 10 February 2021]. Martin O'Kane, 'The Artist as Reader of the Bible: Visual Exegesis and the Adoration of the Magi', *Biblical Interpretation,* 13.4 (2005), 337–73 <https://brill.com/view/journals/bi/13/4/article-p337_1.xml?language=en> [accessed 10 February 2021], (pp. 354–55).

interprets the text in the form of composition. Berdini describes artists as not totally free concerning interpretation of a text, neither are they completely controlled by it. Artists work with the trajectory of the text and have a responsibility to it. A painting is not an objective biblical scene, it is an artist's interpretation of a biblical scene, a visualization of the artist's reading of the text. Artists expand texts as part of their visualization; there are gaps to be filled and ambiguities to explore but the artist's responsibility to the text remains. Responsibility does not require a naive form of correspondence; an artist's reading may exceed the literal and explore significance, but reference is maintained. Art does not replace the text; it sends the viewer back to the text for a new encounter.[44] If art has a hermeneutical function, it can be viewed as a form of reception criticism showing how a text has been interpreted by artists down the centuries. Visual exegesis, like a revelatory approach, is part of a process of revealing the realities of the text and its layers of meaning.

Art may keep close to a biblical text, but its hermeneutical role makes it more than an illustration, illumination might be a more appropriate term. Keith Christensen notes that some Renaissance artists prioritized exposition, which was often achieved through carefully composed scenes as an interpretive act. Narratives were not just reproduced, they were rethought.[45] Dyrness describes artists such as Dürer, Rembrandt and Ruisdael as active interpreters of Scripture.[46] Greenstein sees meaning and significance as the primary task of the artist. How narrative reality is depicted communicates its significance and meaning. It was important for Renaissance artists that their biblical scene was faithful to the biblical text, but artists had to decide what constituted being faithful. Artists could be faithful in different ways: faithful to the event and to the chronology of the narrative, faithful to the way it is told and its significance.[47] The issues artists faced as interpreters mirror those of the preacher. A sermon can be faithful in different ways but ultimately it is significance and meaning that are the priority and that gives the preacher, like the artist, some freedom concerning other aspects of the text.

Mieke Bal emphasizes the relationship between word and image; art influences how a text is read and art is anchored in textual sources. An image cannot

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[44] Paolo Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano: Painting as Visual Exegesis*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 1–4, 6–7, 9–14, 34.
[45] Keith Christiansen, 'Early Renaissance Narrative Painting in Italy', *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin,* 41.2 (1983), 1–48 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3259419> [accessed 10 February 2021] (pp. 5, 7, 17).
[46] Dyrness, *Visual Faith,* pp. 55–57.
[47] Greenstein, *Mantegna,* pp. 13, 116–118, 179, 184.

replace a text, for the artist relies on the text for viewer recognition. A series of paintings by different artists on the same subject are only recognized as the same subject because the viewer knows the text.[48] This raises the issue of the relationship between sermon and text; the sermon is anchored in the text but the sermon then influences how the text is read.

6.7.2 Significance and the material

A revelatory approach takes seriously the physical and other realities reflected in a text and finds meaning within those realities. In art, significance is tied to the material; representational art is not about revealing spiritual truths in an abstract manner. Alberti was clear, the painter's province was what could be seen.[49] Meaning and significance, the 'higher meaning', had to be communicated through faithful representation.[50] The way an action is painted can transform information into significance. Holman Hunt was interested in presenting accurate details of Palestinian life, but significance was important. His painting *The Scapegoat* calls to mind The Day of Atonement and Christ's atoning sacrifice without becoming unrealistic. [51] Martin Meisel calls this way of communicating significance 'focused narrative' where a story or 'nest of stories' is concentrated in one image without the image losing its reality. Hunt's goat remains goaty.[52] The exegesis is integral to the material form. Flannery O Connor sums up this aspect of art when talking of authors, 'If he doesn't make these natural things believable in themselves, he can't make them believable in any of their spiritual extensions.'[53] In revelatory preaching, people and their material situation need to be drawn in a believable manner if spiritual insights are to have integrity and be identified as relevant.

6.7.3 Reading an image

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[48] Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), pp. 27–8, 31, 35–36, 38.
[49] Alberti, *On Painting*, p. 43.
[50] Greenstein, *Mantegna,* p. 186.
[51] William Holman Hunt, *The Scapegoat,* 1854–55, oil on canvas, 86.5 × 139.8 cm, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight <https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/artifact/scapegoat> [accessed 16 February 2021].
[52] Martin Meisel, 'Seeing It Feelingly: Victorian Symbolism and Narrative Art', *Huntington Library Quarterly,* 49 (1986), 67–92 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3817192> [accessed 10 February 2021] (pp.72, 79–83).
[53] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose,* ed. by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972) <https://archive.org/details/mysterymannersoc00ocon/mode/2up> [accessed 16 February 2021], p.176.

Ernst Gombrich described the drive for understanding in the way people read images. Initially, viewers have a rough impression of an image as a whole then, as they scan, things are held in short-term storage and either confirmed or revised as viewing proceeds. The parts that have been scanned are held in the immediate memory until they can be placed in the whole. In viewing art, meaning has primacy. Viewers cannot understand gestures and expressions within a painting without interpreting; meaning is involved from the beginning.[54]

To understand an artist's interpretation of a text, a painting has to be read according to art's conventions but as Speidel points out, some polyvalence remains; the conventions do not exercise rigid control of meaning. Paintings may guide but do not control the way they are 'read', mind control is not needed; sufficient control is enough.[55] Artists have the means to exercise some guidance concerning both order and meaning without negating the interpretive role of the viewer.

6.8 An integrated approach

Martin O'Kane is an example of an integrated approach to visual interpretation. His is a cooperative hermeneutic similar to the approach I detailed earlier as appropriate for revelatory preaching. He holds in tension artist, artwork and viewer. Rather than assigning power to one agent, O'Kane explores the dynamic between all three. Drawing on Gadamer, he describes an active dialogue between artist and viewer enabled by the artwork. Viewers are active in the process of seeing and understanding as they are drawn into the 'play of meaning' within an artwork.[56] There is interplay between the three realities.

6.8.1 The artist

An artist's interpretation of a text may provide an insight for a sermon. Veronese's *Last Supper/Feast at the House of Levi* could provide insights into the Eucharist as God's feast open to all types of people. As with textual hermeneutics, the artist's direction expresses their understanding of the narrative. Artists express their interpretation through the elements of art and use these to guide viewers. Duccio, in his *Maestà* for Sienna Cathedral, placed *The Healing of the Man Born Blind* next to

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[54] Gombrich, 'Moment and Movement', pp. 301–02.
[55] Speidel, 'Can a Single Still Picture Tell a Story?', pp. 188–89.
[56] Martin O'Kane, 'Wirkungsgeschichte and Visual Exegesis: The Contribution of Hans-Georg Gadamer', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament,* 33.2 (2010), 147–59 <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0142064X10385859> (p. 148–151).

The Transfiguration so that the blind man gazes out of his frame and appears to be seeing the transfigured Christ, creating a comment on sight and insight.[57] What is foregrounded and what is in the background expresses artist direction as does size, colour, light, texture, composition and style. The tradition of the artist is also important; a Baroque painting of the annunciation differs markedly from a Pre-Raphaelite one, but both retain a sense of reference to the text and event.

The artist may direct the viewer by highlighting aspects that the textual narrative touches on briefly or by approaching a narrative from a particular perspective. Andrea Mantegna approached the subject of the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* feet first, no halos, no angels, just Christ fully human and dead.[58]

6.8.2 The artwork

An artwork is not just self-referential. Michael Austin holds that although art's relationship to reality is complex, there is still a basic trust in reality by artists. Art is 'fundamentally related to the material' but it remains a transformative experience.[59] Relating to reality for art includes the broad nature of reality, from the social, spiritual and psychological to the political and economic. An artwork is more than just a representation of a scene or transposing a text into visual form; there is both representation and insight. O'Kane, drawing on Gadamer, asserts that art, like language, has 'disclosive powers'; it can reveal the hidden. He stresses that even landscapes are not neutral; place is an interpretive factor in text and art.[60]

It could be argued that in advocating the use of art as a model for a revelatory approach I am moving one step further from reality; the text reflects reality in some way then the artist interprets and reflects the text. Despite this, artworks could be perceived as coming closer to the original situation in sharing a material nature and by its compositional structure as the artist can hold more of the narrative in focus. When the focus changes in written or oral narratives certain aspects of the setting and

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[57] Duccio, *The Healing of the Man Born Blind*, 1307/8–1311, egg tempera on wood, 45.1 × 46.7 cm, The National Gallery, London <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/duccio-the-healing-of-the-man-born-blind> [accessed 10 February 2021].
Duccio, *The Transfiguration,* 1307/8–1311, egg tempera on wood, 48.5 × 51.4 cm, The National Gallery, London <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/duccio-the-transfiguration> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[58] Andrea Mantegna, *The Lamentation Over the Dead Christ*, *c.*1490, tempera on canvas, 68 × 81 cm, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan <https://pinacotecabrera.org/en/collezione-online/opere/the-dead-christ-and-three-mourners/> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[59] Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology and Imagination* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 31, 40.

[60] O'Kane, *Painting the Text*, pp. 30, 39, 160, 165.

some characters may drop out of the reader/hearer's consciousness but the composition of an artwork can keep more of the situation before the viewer.

6.8.3 The viewer

Engaging with art is a two-way process; the viewer may assess the artwork in light of the text and the artwork may raise issues that cause the viewer to interrogate the text.[61] But is the viewer free to interpret an artwork without restriction? Some people see faces in Jackson Pollack's works but is this imposing an extrinsic construction on a painting?[62] Terry Barrett notes that some artists deliberately leave a work ambiguous, putting the responsibility on the viewer, but this is not true of the majority of artworks. All interpretation says something about the viewer, but responses become particularly subjective if the criticism reveals more about the viewer than the artwork. Generally, the viewer's role is acknowledged, but it needs to have both emotional and intellectual integrity. Barrett defines a good interpretation as needing 'coherence, correspondence, and inclusiveness'. It needs to make sense, relate to the artwork and be inclusive of the whole work. A viewer's response does not have to 'match' the artist's but should take account of realities such as the culture within which the artwork arose. These factors may not be determinative but need to be considered.[63] Barrett's definition gives interpretation some definite boundaries, however, not all interpretations include the whole work. A sermon may focus on a detail and not necessarily engage in any depth with the whole work. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the detail should be in line with the interpretation of the whole work even if the rest of the work is not discussed.

Visual interpretation is affected by the culture of both artist and viewer. An example of the culture of the viewer affecting interpretation is a panel painting called *Two Courtesans* dated as fifteenth century. The image shows two bored courtesans awaiting clients, according to art criticism at the beginning of the twentieth century. The painting did not originally have a title, but it gained its 'courtesan' inscription as a result of the theme of the brothel that was popular at the time. When the other half of the panel was discovered, it became clear that these were two bored noble women

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[61] J. Cheryl Exum and Ela Nutu, 'Introduction', in *Between the Text and the Canvas:* ed. by Exum and Nutu, pp. 1–3.
[62] Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art,* pp. 122–23.
[63] Terry Barrett, 'Principles for Interpreting Art', *Art Education,* 47.5 (1994), 8–13 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3193496?seq=1> [accessed 10 February 2021] (pp. 10–12).

waiting for their men to return from the hunt.[64] The inscription has now been changed to *The Wait: Hunting on the Lagoon and Two Venetian Ladies.*[65]

6.9 Preaching and hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is integral to every style of preaching, but texts on which sermons are based vary in their degree of openness to a range of interpretations. Texts with a wide degree of openness give up some of their power and invite a range of understandings. Humility and some flexibility in interpretation means that sometimes preachers step back from using the power of argument and present possibilities or use the power of affect with control. Some parables work in this way; the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1–13) is particularly open, inviting different interpretations. Other texts are more univocal by nature; texts on social justice are often straightforward declaring that some types of behaviour are totally unacceptable to God. Sometimes the text offers a straightforward choice or makes demands rather than suggestions and a sermon can reflect that. On those occasions a single meaning is warranted. In the following extracts Brown Taylor demonstrates both types of endings. Deuteronomy 30:19–20 calls for a straightforward ending about choice. ‘We have been fully informed. Heaven and earth will witness to that. The choice is ours: blessings or curses, life or death. What will it be people of God? Let us choose this day whom we will serve.’[66] In Contrast, texts, such as John 21:3–13 warrant a more open ending.

> ‘It is the Lord!’ That is what the beloved disciple said. How did he know? How does any of us know? By staying on the lookout, I suppose. […] By listening real hard. By living in great expectation and refusing to believe that our nets will stay empty or our nights will last forever. For those with ears to hear, there is voice that can turn all our dead ends into new beginnings. ‘Come,’ that voice says, ‘and have breakfast.’[67]

Art can suggest a range of perspectives and interpretations of a text. The following description sets the scene for part of the story of Ruth and drew on Jean-

[64] Nadeije Laneyrie-Dagen, *How to Read Paintings* (Edinburgh: Chambers Harrop, 2004), p. xii–xiii.
[65] Vittore Carpaccio, *The Wait: Hunting on the Lagoon and Two Venetian Ladies, c*.1490–1495*,* oil and tempera on wood. *Hunting on the Lagoon*, 78 × 63 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. *Two Venetian Ladies,* 94 × 63.5 cm, Museo Correr, Venice <http://www.artinsociety.com/carpacciorsquos-double-enigma-hunting-on-the-lagoon-and-the-two-venetian-ladies.html> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[66] Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Healing Word: Gospel Medicine for the Soul* (London: SPCK, 2013), p. 140.
[67] Brown Taylor, *The Healing Word,* p. 96

Francois Millet's painting *The Gleaners,* which shows how back-breaking Ruth's work was. This triggered interpreting the physical specifics of Ruth's life as an outworking of her promise.[68]

> Ruth stands and arches her back.
> She places her hands in the small of her back and stretches.
> Her back aches from working bent double in the heat.
> Strands of hair stick to her forehead,
> her clothes are dark with sweat.
> […]
> She recalls her promise:
> 'Where you go, I will go.'
> And here she is, in a field in Bethlehem.
> […]
> Promises may be made in poetry,
> But they are paid in pain.[69]

Jolyon Mitchell based a sermon on *Belshazzar's Feast* by Rembrandt.[70] His sermon engages with the details of the painting and its interaction with the text, drawing out its meaning and significance

> Or there, look at the woman in the red dress. She holds a solid precious goblet. But it cannot retain its liquid, it pours out like a waterfall. […] The king's rule, his power is poured out. Symbols of stolen power are emptied. Rembrandt show us how *all* rulers' power will eventually come to an end.[71]

6.10 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to develop a cooperative hermeneutic for both visual and textual narratives that is hospitable to a revelatory approach and a critical realist position. It acknowledged the role of the historical situation in exercising appropriate control over interpretation but allowed for some play in meaning. In this approach the realities of author, text and reader or artist, artwork and viewer are given appropriate weight and held in tension. The emphasis throughout has been on active roles for author, text and reader/hearer, for words have meaning and meaning has

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[68] Jean-Fran François Millet, *The Gleaners,* 1857, oil on canvas, 83.5 × 110 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/index.php?id=851&L=1&tx_commentaire_pi1%5BshowUid%5D=341> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[69] Margaret Cooling, *Ruth: Promises and Pain* <https://preachpreach.com/2018/10/11/ruth/> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[70] Rembrandt, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1636–1638, oil on canvas, 167.6 × 209.2 cm, The National Gallery, London <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/rembrandt-belshazzars-feast> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[71] Jolyon Mitchell, 'Daniel 5: The Writing on the Wall', in *Wrestling with the Word*, ed. by Bruce and Harrison, pp. 84–91, (p. 86).

consequences in the world. The reader is neither the passive recipient nor the master but engages with the text and author while exercising hermeneutic virtues. This aligns with a revelatory approach that works with the realities displayed in the text and allows a degree of polyvalence and does not seek to resolve every ambiguity. Real-world reference not only exercises some constraint over interpretations; it also provides possibilities in terms of completion and enactment. Reference to reality is understood as complex, subtle and variable depending on the genre of the text, allowing some sermons to end more openly than others. This is consistent with the open form of the revelatory plot that does not seek resolution for all narratives.

Chapter seven looks at issues of epistemology; it investigates how people come to know through a revelatory approach and what sort of knowledge it may bring. As with other chapters I explore the role of art, and whether art is a form of knowing. In investigating different ways of knowing I will consider how narrative knowing may be able to deliver doctrine.

Chapter Seven
Responses to the Challenges Raised by Epistemology

This chapter aims to respond to issues of epistemology raised by a revelatory style: how do people come to know through a preaching style that uses creative language, is non-linear and is concerned with displaying rather than presenting arguments and explanations? The intention is to consider different ways of knowing and learning and how they relate to preaching. The issue of how we come to know also raises questions concerning revealed knowledge, a subject developed in the theology section, which seeks to present a broad understanding of revelation within the framework of the revelation of Christ through Scripture. The objective of this chapter is to show that understanding and recognition rather than accumulation of information are appropriate goals for preachers, where the text is not just understood but recognized as relevant.

The three terms that were initially identified as summarising the revelatory plot (invitational, embodied and relevant) are pertinent to epistemology. An invitational approach does not suggest the type of knowing that channels people into a prescribed response, and 'embodied' raises the issue of how people come to know through concepts that are embodied in people and situations within narratives. Can such a style provide epistemic access? Relevance is also integral to the process; if a text and the knowledge it brings is not pertinent to the realities of Christian living why would people want to know it? The issue of how knowledge is gained arises in both preparation and the delivery of a sermon. In preparation there is the question of how the preacher gains insights from biblical narratives, textual and visual. In sermon delivery the issue concerns the potential of the narrative sermon to be a way of knowing for the congregation.

This chapter also aims to explore the role emotion and imagination may play in coming to know through narratives, a crucial issue for revelatory preaching that uses imaginative language and exposes emotional realities as well as physical ones. Where appropriate, the term 'coming to know' is used as it communicates narrative's dynamic quality as opposed to the rather static qualities sometimes associated with an accumulation of factual knowledge. In this chapter I refer to narrative preaching in general as well as revelatory preaching in particular as some aspects of epistemology apply to all forms of narrative preaching.

7.1 Reaction

Propositions are the bedrock of traditional epistemology, which defines knowledge in terms of justified true belief expressed as *S knows that P,* with P standing for proposition. Narrative preaching reacted against rather abstract propositional preaching, does that mean narrative preaching does not communicate knowledge? The issue crystallizes around doctrine. Doctrine is often conceived in propositional form, does this mean narrative is unable to deliver doctrine or can it deliver doctrine in a different way?

This thesis is not trying to demonstrate that people gain knowledge through revelatory preaching in the way knowledge is traditionally defined. Establishing justified true belief in any domain is fraught with difficulties.[1] John Dewey regarded such a quest for certainty in knowledge as unattainable in an uncertain world, 'At the best, all our endeavors look to the future and never attain certainty.'[2] However, I am not excluding informational knowledge and traditional epistemic skills of explanation, analysis, classification, questioning and reflection. The Bible is a mixture of story and reflection on meaning and this, along with diverse genres, demands a variety of epistemological skills.

7. 2. A conflict of virtues

Narrative epistemology (a form of knowing relevant to both resolution and revelatory plot structures) and traditional epistemology present a conflict in terms of virtues and what is valued. The virtues of narrative are often the vices of traditional epistemology. Traditional epistemic virtues are particularly esteemed by the sciences; these have tended to dominate epistemology leading to a downgrading of the arts, including narrative, as a source of knowledge. That, in consequence, has left a question mark over narrative's ability to communicate knowledge, particularly doctrine, despite the fact that narrative is a major genre of the Bible.

Esther Meek describes the traditional view of knowledge as characterized by thinking that is considered to be rational, neutral, objective, and free of emotion. Such knowledge is expressed in the language of explanation and analysis, aiming for precision by honing language to reduce ambiguity. As a result, rationality,

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[1] Jonathan Dancy, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 23–27.
[2] John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: The Gifford Lectures* 1929 <https://www.giffordlectures.org/lectures/quest-certainty> [accessed 10 February 2021], XI.

objectivity, and linguistic precision are regarded as epistemic virtues. This mode of thinking puts an emphasis on abstraction and generalisation as opposed to the concrete and particular. It tends to separate knowledge from the knower, fact from value, reason from emotion, knowledge from imagination and mind from body. In consequence, information, theory, detached observation and the untrammelled operation of the mind are valued. Meek calls these oppositions epistemology's 'default' dichotomies.[3] Given the nature of traditional epistemology, it is difficult to see how sermons that draw on and are shaped by narratives could be understood as a basis for knowledge.

Coming to know through narrative requires fully engaged people, not detached observers. To this end a degree of subjectivity and emotional involvement are valued, as narrative requires an ability to think within a situation rather than standing back from it. In narrative the knower and the known are not separated. This type of holistic thinking embraces the body, the material world, and emotions alongside the mind rather than separating them, a position congruent with revelatory preaching. Imagination is valued as integral to knowing, and narrative embraces the language of lived experience that communicates complexity and depth rather than the honed precision of analysis and explanation. Narrative has a degree of indeterminacy, as no one interpretation exhausts all the possibilities of understanding the truth a narrative may express. This indeterminacy is expressed in both the language and structure of narrative, particularly in its revelatory form. The ability to live with mystery and ambiguity, what John Keats called 'Negative capability', is a feature of revelatory narrative that does not necessarily resolve every problem or clarify every ambiguity.[4] Indeterminacy is part of narrative's invitational appeal, it does not try to channel people into a single response. Rainer Maria Rilke, in *Letters to a Young Poet* makes a case for embracing uncertainty.

> Try to love *the questions themselves* like locked rooms, like books written in a foreign tongue. Do not now strive to uncover answers: they cannot be given you because you have not been able to live them. And what matters is to live everything. *Live* the questions for now. Perhaps then you will gradually, without noticing it, live your way into the answer.[5]

[3] Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), pp. 8–10.
[4] *Letters of John Keats*, *to his Family and Friends, Letter to George and Thomas Keats, 22nd December 1817,* ed. by Sidney Colvin, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35698/35698-h/35698-h.htm#XXIV> [accessed 10 February 2021], p. 48. Gutenberg ebook.
[5] Rainer Maria Rilke**,** *Letters to a Young Poet,* trans. by Charlie Louth (London: Penguin Classics,

7.3 Issues arising

These brief sketches of narrative and epistemic virtues present the central issue: how can people come to know through narrative, which values much of what traditional epistemology deems as vices? A series of interrelated questions flow from this issue. Narratives are about people and they engage people; can knowing embrace narrative's personal form? Traditional epistemology relies on rational-logical thinking that tends to be linear; can people come to know in the non-linear mode of revelatory preaching? What people come to know in narratives is not always explicit; is implicit and intuitive knowing knowledge? Does understanding count as coming to know? Narratives evoke emotions, does this disqualify narrative as knowing? Can narrative be cognitive and a source of knowledge? If narrative is subjective, specific and indeterminate, how can it generalise? What role does imagination and creative language play in coming to know through narrative?

7.4 Personal knowledge

Traditional epistemology tries to keep the personal, and any personal bias, out of the process of coming to know but Michael Polanyi challenged this ideal of depersonalized knowing. For Polanyi, knowing is an activity of fully engaged people not detached observers. Coming to know involves personal struggle and determination. He talks of coming to know as a 'fiduciary' act, an act of trust and commitment by a person. When people seek knowledge, they rely on the work of others and from this position of trust they take risks and feel there is something to be discovered. People follow intuitions in finding a pattern amidst the particulars of life, that in turn may lead to a developing sense of coherence and eventually to discovering meaning. All of these processes are personal committed acts.[6]

Narratives, particularly revelatory narratives, embody knowledge in people and their situations; they also draw listeners into an encounter. Any knowing that happens within a narrative approach cannot be the detached, impersonal knowing of traditional epistemology. A revelatory approach needs hearers who engage with the characters in narratives in a personal way in order to learn.

2016), p. 17.

[6] Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), pp. 15, 18, 27–28, 59–61, 194, 255–56, 266, 300.

7.4.1 Knowing as a relationship

Meek, commenting on Polanyi's work, describes the relationship between the knower and the known as reciprocal. When something is known, when an insight occurs, there can be a sense of gift and self-disclosure by the aspect of the world we are coming to know. The world is not passive; it is not like a body before a forensic scientist; it discloses in its own way whilst retaining mystery.[7] This is not a slide into pantheism, but a recognition of relationality written into the universe. In this view, all knowing is relational and treated as personal, though in some instances that may be by analogy. For Parker Palmer, coming to know is about knowing within a relationship in which the bond is love. Knowledge for both Palmer and Meek is relational and covenantal, it is knowing within a bond of commitment.[8] Christians seek knowledge, but this is not the sole factor in coming to know. The Holy Spirit is active in revelation. Knowing and revelation are two aspects of one process.

David Rutledge identifies Michael Polanyi as a critical realist.[9] For Polanyi coming to know is about apprehending and revealing hidden reality. Once the knower comes to an insight there follows a responsibility to obey it, for there is contact with reality in some way, it has relevance. Responsibility is expressed in a personal act of submission to the reality discovered. For Polanyi, knowing is discovery, which is part of an active process for discoveries do not close down possibilities, they are often pregnant with potential.[10] In a revelatory approach, the insight is the beginning of a deeper engagement with the narrative realities.

7.4.2 Personal knowing and narrative preaching

Preaching is a face-to-face event that is personal and reciprocal in structure as the congregation and preacher respond to each other through the sermon. In narrative preaching, particularly in its revelatory form, preacher and congregation respond to the world, people and ideas embodied in biblical narratives. There is an acknowledgement that people want to know that world, those people, those ideas

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[7] Meek, *Loving to Know*, pp. 14–15, 37, 97.

[8] Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), pp. 31–2, 58. Meek, *Loving to Know*, pp. 41–43, 49–51.

[9] David W. Rutledge, 'Who Was Michael Polanyi? A Primer for Poteat Scholars', *Tradition and Discovery,* 42.1 (2015), 10–17 <https://doi.org/10.5840/traddisc20154213> (p. 12).

[10] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* pp. 63, 130, 137, 315.

better and in doing so come to know God. These are personal encounters with doctrine embedded in people and situations. In order to learn from a sermon there needs to be a relationship of trust between congregation and preacher, for coming to know in a sermon context is a fiduciary act. When preparing, preachers rely on the work of scholars and work from that platform of trust as they explore narrative texts and images. Searching for meaning within a biblical narrative involves personal commitment to the task, a belief that there is meaning to be found that will be relevant. The process involves risk and sometimes daring. There is a trust in the work of the Spirit and faith in a personal God who reveals, as seen in Scripture.

Knowing as an act of faith mirrors knowing in the Bible. Dru Johnson sees biblical knowing taking place within a relationship of trust in God. Knowing in the Bible is ongoing, it is a journey into knowledge. God often leads people through a process of knowing that is both fluid and personal. In whatever way the Genesis stories are understood, they give an insight into a biblical form of knowing. God leads Adam through a process of coming to know his 'proper mate' through naming the animals and finding no one suitable as a helper and partner (Genesis 2:20). We also see the moment of discovery when faced with Eve 'bone of my bones' (Genesis 2:23). This form of knowing becomes 'a doorway to further disclosures'.[11]

Narrative invites people to respond and there can be a sense of discovery, excitement and challenge. This can be accompanied by a sense of the narrative opening up. In revelatory preaching, when an insight emerges, there can be a feeling of coming in contact with reality, be it physical, emotional, social, economic or spiritual. The reality contacted is, from a critical realist point of view, 'objective' in the sense that it exists whether we are aware of it or not. As with any contact with reality, there is an obligation of obedience, a responsibility to change thinking and behaviour in a way that aligns with the discovery. This is the outworking of the sermon in life that flows from the encounter but it is not coercive.

7.4.3 Truth as a person

Palmer defines truth as a person; knowledge in the gospels is primarily truth embodied in a person rather than a proposition. 'I am the way the truth and the life,' said Jesus (John 14:6).[12] God is revealed in the person of Jesus. This personal form

[11] Dru Johnson, *Biblical Knowing: A Scriptural Epistemology of Error* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), pp. 14, 25–30, 32.
[12] Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, pp. 47–51.

of knowing accepts ordinary ways of coming to know, for few people operate in the objective and impersonal style of traditional epistemology. Personal knowing also works with the revelatory style with its focus on character and insight. Dru Johnson draws attention to the fluid nature of knowing in the Bible, where knowledge is not a static proposition but a relationship moving through time. In the Exodus and wilderness narratives Israel's journey is both literal and spiritual as the people begin a journey of discovery concerning their relationship with God. The Bible shows little interest in collecting information and 'brute looking and hearing alone' are not enough to bring knowledge.[13]

7.5 Other ways of knowing

Coming to know can happen in a variety of ways. Knowledge is often assumed to come in a conscious step by step logical process, however, knowing is often accomplished in indirect ways and we are not always aware of the processes by which we come to know. Knowledge can come in a non-linear fashion and it can be implicit and intuitive. Once this type of knowing was not classed as knowledge, but increasingly different ways of knowing are accepted.

7.5.1. Non- linear knowing

In revelatory preaching, knowledge can come in non-linear ways that do not reflect a logical step by step pattern, although the process is not illogical. The process Polanyi describes as personal knowledge is not linear, it is a pattern recognition exercise. He maintained that insights are not achieved by moving from one fact to the next until an insight is reached; the process is more of a gestalt experience. The process involves looking at the particulars, the distinct pieces of data, and finding a significant pattern. People may sit before an array of details, puzzled at their seemingly unrelated nature, but by immersing themselves in the particulars a pattern begins to emerge. Meaning is not in the individual particulars, but in their integration into a significant pattern. The particulars then retreat below conscious awareness and become subsidiary, the pattern or meaning becomes the object of focal awareness. An instance of this is reading; skilled readers no longer register the individual letters or words on a page; attention is focussed on the meaning of blocks of text. The

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[13] Dru Johnson, *Biblical Knowing,* pp. 103, 67, 70–80, 127.

individual letters recede to subsidiary status, no longer the focus of attention for they have been integrated into the whole.[14]

Visually, the particulars of a text can be imagined as a series of a 'dots'. Discovering meaning is recognising a significant pattern that joins many of the dots. A pattern will not join all the dots and later a different pattern may be discovered that makes sense of more of the particulars. As new ways of looking at the data, or new data arises, different particulars may be connected creating new patterns. Polanyi calls this 'recognition of alternative part-whole relations'.[15] The insight becomes the focus, the particulars recede. Barbara Bennet Baumgarten describes this feat as integrative rather than deductive.[16] The knowledge involved in such a feat is transformative rather than cumulative.

The issue arises concerning whether patterns are recognized or constructed. Using the Polanyi model, I would once again opt for the term *develop* in terms of narrative knowing. Initially it is a discovery, there is some pattern to be discovered that is integral to the narrative that can be developed. The test of whether a pattern of meaning is legitimate is if it joins a significant number of dots and if the dots joined are significant. It is not imposing an alien pattern. No pattern joins all the 'dots' there is always surplus meaning, more possibilities, keeping the narrative open.

For Polanyi, indwelling and breaking out are two aspects of coming to know that do not reflect a linear process. We indwell the particulars, immerse ourselves in them in order to apprehend a significant pattern. Once a pattern is discovered there is often a breaking out of accepted structures and frameworks in order to create the new.[17] A reconfiguration takes place. Copernicus broke out of the Ptolemaic, earth-centred view of the universe to establish the heliocentric view. Jerome Bruner does not see art following a strict logical process, it goes beyond instrumental knowing to insight or 'illumination' to use Bruner's term. Illumination often has the quality of surprise but once the insight is gained there is a sense of recognition, almost a feeling that it is obvious.[18] Henri Poincare commented that illuminations 'reveal to us unsuspected relations between other facts, long since known, but wrongly believed to

[14] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* pp. 56–58, 92.
[15] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* p. 117.
[16] Barbara Bennet Baumgarten, 'Artistic Expression and Contemplation: Some Reflections Based on the Epistemology of Michael Polanyi', *Tradition and Discovery,* 21.2 (1994/5), 11–15 <https://doi.org/10.5840/traddisc1994/199521219> (p. 11).
[17] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* pp. 195–202.
[18] Jerome S. Bruner, *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 14, 18–19.

be unrelated to each other'.[19] George Whalley describes this sense of recognition as the terminus of coming to know through the arts, rather than knowing ending in conclusions.[20] Relevance can come through recognition, the acknowledgement that a biblical narrative is pertinent to Christian living.

7.5.2 Non-linear knowing and narrative preaching

There is a degree of conflict with Polanyi's subsidiary status of particulars once the meaning (insight) is found. Revelatory preaching initially resists moving on from the particulars that create the key insight; the meaning is developed in and through those particulars. Other particulars may retreat into subsidiary status. In this style of preaching the particulars (dots) are the people, situations, sense experiences, actions, and speech in a text. The preacher returns the text to its particulars in order to explore new patterns of meaning. Polanyi labels this 'dismemberment'.[21] This process is described in chapter four as 'creating a living text'. The accepted pattern is dissolved in order to look at the particulars differently. Baumgarten describes this as a contemplative act that dissolves the integration in order deepen it.[22] Once a text is returned to its particulars, the preacher begins to join the 'dots', to find inherent patterns in the narrative particulars. This means that the same text can be preached differently as new patterns are recognized. The incident of David and Saul at the Cave of Engedi (I Samuel 24) can be preached as a story of reconciliation triumphing over revenge, it can also be preached as a story of listening (Saul listening to David's enemies, David listening to his men and his conscience). Both are integral to the text.

The revelatory approach advances relevance by recognition and identification. The sense of recognition as well as a sense of the new is acknowledged in the homiletic literature; Craddock describes it as a 'nod of recognition' followed by a 'shock of recognition' as something new is drawn out of something already known.[23] Recognition is involved when new and significant patterns bring a reconfiguration of previous thinking, which can be triggered by joining different dots or the input of new information. The story of the young Samuel and Eli can be reconfigured as a second chance at fatherhood for Eli, having failed

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[19] Henri Poincaré, *Science and Method,* trans. by Francis Maitland (New York: Dover Publications, 1952) <https://archive.org/details/sciencemethod00poinrich> [accessed 19 February 2021], p. 51. Internet Archive ebook.
[20] Whalley, *Poetic Process*, p. xxviii.
[21] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, p. 63.
[22] Baumgarten, 'Artistic Expression and Contemplation', 11–15 (p. 15).
[23] Craddock, *Preaching*, pp. 159–61.

with his own sons (I Samuel 2:12–26). This links that story with other stories where God gives people a second chance. The story gains new neighbours.

Dru Johnson observes that biblical knowing is not an accumulation of information, it is transformative knowing, and in the Bible we see people coming to know through reconfiguration. The early church reconfigured who could be included in the Kingdom of God. Peter's vision and Gentiles coming to Christ prompted a re-envisioning the breadth of the gospel (Acts 10:9–16, Acts 15.1–20).[24] Lowry uses the analogy of painting to express the type of cognition involved in narrative understanding, which is more of an encounter than serial thinking. For Lowry, insight can come through aesthetic knowing, through moments of illumination.[25] Serial thinking, step by step logic, can leave congregants feeling channelled into an expected response if it is not carefully handled. The revelatory approach uses a non-linear logic that reduces this danger.

7.5.3 Implicit and intuitive knowing

When people enter a search for knowledge there can be a sense that there is something to be discovered, that they are on the right trail. Patterns begin to emerge. This is a form of intuitive foreknowledge that Polanyi roots in tacit knowing that guides our searching before we fully know. Tacit knowing is knowledge that we are not fully aware of, that we cannot fully articulate. Our tacit sense enables us to navigate the path to discovery.[26] Mark Mitchell notes that this has a bearing on Meno's paradox that states, 'If we know what we are looking for, why do we need to pursue it further? If we do not know what we are seeking then the search is impossible as we cannot search for what we do not know.' Meno's paradox is only a problem if all knowledge is explicit.[27]

For Polanyi, knowledge rests on tacit knowing for we hold a large amount of knowledge that we are not focally aware of; people know more than they can tell.[28] Previously, tacit knowing had been dismissed as non-knowledge but since the nineteenth century there has been a growing awareness of its importance. Polanyi is not the only person to think in terms of tacit knowledge, Lesslie Newbigin talked of

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[24] Dru Johnson, *Biblical Knowing,* pp. 4–6, 9.
[25] Lowry, *Doing Time in the Pulpit*, pp. 81–85.
[26] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* pp. 126–29.
[27] Mark T. Mitchell*, Michael Polanyi: The Art of Knowing* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006), pp. 79–80.
[28] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 88, 312.

relational knowledge and a type of knowing where people are not fully in control.[29] Polanyi is clear that tacit knowledge is not infallible, verification is needed. People are not solo searchers after meaning, they exist as part of a community and stand within a tradition, both of which can be part of the validation of insights. There is authority involved; there is the authority of the discipline in which people work and the authority of skilled practitioners. For Polanyi this does not mean an authoritarian brake on new insights; tradition and community are dynamic and developing and can incorporate new insights. All knowledge seekers stand on a platform built by others. No one has a virgin mind.[30]

The moment of insight, when particulars cohere into a whole, into meaning, often involves what Polanyi calls ‘a leap’ over a gap that logic does not fill. This leap involves both skill and creativity.[31] In retrospect a more conventional account is often produced but that does not necessarily reflect the actual process. The leap may come first and the evidence later with intuitive knowledge facilitating the crossing.[32] The acknowledgement of intuition and tacit knowledge, exercised in community and within a tradition, legitimises ordinary knowing and no longer excludes the majority of learners. It is a process that many people may identify as true to their experience.

7.5.4 Intuition and implicit knowing in narrative preaching

In revelatory preaching, when creating a living text, the preacher is faced with the particulars of the biblical narrative, a mass of sensed details and specifics: characters, actions, times, places, speech, thoughts, and objects. What had been subsidiary is once more the focus of attention. In looking for patterns of meaning within those details the preacher is guided by tacit knowledge built up over time with a range of texts. Tacit knowledge can give the preacher an intuitive sense of ‘being onto something’ and this is explored until it becomes explicit, until an insight is reached. Many preachers may recognize the process where an insight comes by an intuitive leap but there follows a process of going back over the text and seeing if it is valid in light of the narrative, the community and tradition. Community includes both the community of faith and the community of scholars.

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[29] Lesslie Newbigin. *Proper Confidence: Faith Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 10–11.
[30] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* pp. 53, 164, 207–09, 295.
[31] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* pp. 123–30, 143.
[32] Mark Mitchell, *Michael Polanyi,* pp. 5, 80–81.

The biblical concept of knowing includes the acknowledgement of authority, both of skilled practitioners and the biblical text. Barnabas vouches for the authenticity of Paul's conversion (Acts 9:27).[33] Philip guides the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40). Other epistemological factors also come into play, such as coherence within the wider narrative of the Bible and the relationship to reality and experience, particularly experience as understood within the redemptive work of Christ.

7.6 Knowledge, understanding and emotion

In both art and narrative, the question of understanding is significant. Jochen Breisen suggests understanding as the epistemic aim of art but maintains that although understanding is not identical to knowledge, knowledge is not sufficient for understanding. Understanding is not individual pieces of knowledge; it is a set of connections that are a part of knowing.[34] Patrick Sherry speaks of art, like narrative, as fostering understanding by showing and expressing human actions and reactions and by showing grace at work in the world. Art can equally show the absence of grace. Art, by its nature, shows rather than explains. It is a reflective presentation of how things are, with doctrine often implied.[35] Art can show repentance and forgiveness and the consequences of sin. Robert Braithwaite Martineau's *Last Day in the Old Home* shows the effects of gambling on family life.[36]

It is possible for people to repeat things they 'know' without understanding. Like most people I can repeat Einstein's equation of special relativity ($e = mc^2$) but I have no idea what it means. Our answers may be technically correct, but we cannot be said to know if we do not understand. Even if people have a superficial understanding of something, that may still fail to qualify as knowledge if it is no more than an isolated and undigested piece of data that is not embedded in a web of previous knowledge and experience. I can repeat a dictionary definition of Einstein's equation and I understand each of the words separately but still do not understand the whole. Understanding may not be the same as knowledge but knowledge without a significant depth of understanding may also fail to qualify as knowing.

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[33] Dru Johnson, *Biblical Knowing*, pp. 4–5.

[34] Jochen Briesen, 'Pictorial Art and Epistemic aims', in *Art Theory as Visual Epistemology: The Image and the Mind,* ed. by Harald Klinke, unabridged edn (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), pp. 11–27 (pp. 16–17).

[35] Patrick Sherry, *Images of Redemption: Art, Literature and Salvation* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), pp. 167–172.

[36] Robert Braithwaite Martineau, *Last Day in the Old Home,* 1862, oil on canvas, 107.3 × 144.8 cm, Tate Gallery, London <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/martineau-the-last-day-in-the-old-home-n01500> [accessed 10 February 2021].

7.6.1 Understanding: relationships between old and new

An essential feature of understanding is recognising relevant relationships between old and new knowledge. Understanding organizes knowledge by making links and finding relevant relationships. The arts, visual and textual, deepen understanding and help people to see in a fresh way. That new perspective is integrated with experience and other knowledge to create a greater understanding.

One problem with nominating understanding as an epistemic aim for the arts is that it could reduce them to a confirmatory status. Scepticism towards the arts as a means of understanding is expressed by Jerome Stolnitz who maintains that art cannot generate truths, and Noël Carroll who designates the knowledge gained from narratives as ‘trivial’ compared to propositions, as they may just activate previous knowledge.[37] There is a degree of truth in this; activation of previous knowledge is part of understanding, but it is more than that. Sometimes it is coming to know what was already known in a new way. People knew war was brutal before the war poets of World War I. People knew racism was wrong before the speeches of Martin Luther King but knowledge was significantly deepened by these works. Michael Austin talks of art ‘bearing witness’ as well as asserting truth.[38] The bearing witness role asserts truth, but leaves the hearer to judge, it can be compelling without being coercive, the compulsion comes from inside rather than an outside force.

7.6.2 Depth and reconfiguration

Reconfiguration is breaking out of presumed ways of looking at something and reconfiguring how it is understood. It is seeing new patterns that can bring a new and deeper understanding. Elgin describes this process as looking at the over-looked. Different ways of seeing and understanding can be suggested by ‘reorganizing, reweighting and shifting the center of epistemic gravity’, this gives access to things people may not have had entree to before.[39] Depth is a key concept in coming to

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[37] Sarah E. Worth, 'Art and Epistemology', in *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (2003) <https://iep.utm.edu/art-ep/> [accessed 10 February 2021] (sections 2, 6).
[38] Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art,* pp. 70.
[39] Catherine Z. Elgin, ‘Art in the Advancement of Understanding’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 39.1 (2012), 1–12 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20010054?seq=1> [accessed 10 February 2021] (pp. 1, 3–4, 13, 20).

know through narratives, visual or textual. Louis Arnaud Reid describes the type of intuitive knowledge that art brings as the root from which deeper knowledge and understanding grows through experience, reflection, discussion and analysis.[40] This combines the skills associated with traditional epistemology alongside a more personal, intuitive way of coming to know. Polanyi's account of personal knowledge does not exclude these traditional skills. Understanding deepens knowledge but does it do more than that? What people perceive in narrative and in life is inhibited by the patterns of thinking that are taken for granted and by the mass of detail within which life is experienced. Habit and familiar thinking patterns tend to reduce the possibilities people entertain and reduce the connections made. Narratives, visual or textual, select and rearrange so that people can make new connections and think in new ways. Narratives often reduce distracting details to enable people to consider an issue. Understanding can reconfigure previous knowledge, which involves moving things from one community of stories, ideas, and practices to another so that the members of that community shed light on the new member and vice versa.

A revelatory approach uses the imagination and its exploration of character opens up the possibility of empathy, both of which are linked to understanding. The arts provide imaginative experiences that allow people to walk in another person's shoes. This may provide deep insights into a character and their situation and reveal a glimpse of the world as they saw it, conveying empathetic knowledge. People can learn from imaginative experience in ways that Matthew Kieran labels as 'epistemologically significant'.[41] Empathetic knowledge can give us what Sarah Worth describes as 'off-line exercises'.[42] In narratives and through imagination there is the freedom to 'try on' certain attitudes and behaviours and explore their consequences before there is commitment to them. This is a specific style of contextual thinking associated with narrative, it is not just thinking *enabled* by narrative but what Jensen calls 'thinking in story', thinking within a narrative mode. This does not side-step thinking, it is a change of thinking style.[43]

7.6.3 Understanding and narrative preaching

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[40] Louis Arnaud Reid, 'Aesthetic Knowledge', in *The Arts: A Way of Knowing,* ed. by Malcom Ross (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1983), pp. 19–41 (p. 39).
[41] Matthew Kieran, 'Aesthetic Knowledge', in *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, ed. by Sven Bernecker and Duncan Pritchard, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 369–379 (pp. 377).
[42] Worth, 'Art and Epistemology', (section 5).
[43] Jensen, *Thinking in Story*, pp. 28, 114.

For the preacher, the journey of coming to know may be fraught with confusion. When an insight comes there may still be questions unanswered, and it is an act of trust to work through this without wanting to resolve everything totally or too quickly. Preparation requires the preacher to hold her nerve until appropriate clarity comes. The finished sermon may work through some of the preacher's struggle, but only enough to engage the congregation. Polanyi talks of the artist helping people to 'enter a wide world of sights, sounds and emotions which they had never seen, heard or felt before.'[44] The preacher can do the same. The finished sermon should not leave the congregation confused or with a complete absence of closure. The sermon can bring assurance and understanding without tight closure and simplistic conclusions. Simplistic conclusions can lead to disillusion when Christians are faced with the reality of living their faith in a fallen world.

Understanding as an epistemic aim is relevant to all narrative preaching. A revelatory style, with its reduced pace and reflective nature, gives a congregation time to empathise with the situations and characters in biblical narratives and gain empathetic knowledge. The insight a preacher comes to may deepen understanding by reconfiguration, making new connections or seeing the text in a new way. Reconfiguration can provoke people to consider their assumptions about a text. Sometimes the traditional interpretations are apposite, but there are times when the congregation hear the reading and disengage, feeling they can predict what the sermon will say. Like a pond-strider insect a sermon can skate on the surface of a text and never reach its depths. Unless there is intervention, thought, like water, travels down the path of least resistance. Polanyi emphasizes how hard it is for people to break out of habitual ways of thinking, it requires an effort to pierce the 'film of familiarity' and go beyond superficial thinking.[45] Reconfiguration can help break through the constraints of habitual thinking and encourage deeper cognitive engagement. An example of reconfiguration is Blake's painting of Naomi and Ruth, which reconfigures Naomi's story as one of sacrifice and metaphorical resurrection. Reconfiguration moves Naomi into the community of resurrection stories, symbols and practices. For the preacher, analysis can follow insight so that both intuitive, personal knowing and the more traditional cognitive skills of epistemology are exercised.

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[44] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* p. 200.
[45] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* p. 199.

Over a period of time a congregation may come to know basic Christian doctrines; in some traditions this will be through the saying of the creeds. Some people will be able to give a basic dictionary definition of those doctrines, but can this really be counted as knowledge? The statement from the Nicene Creed, 'Incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary',[46] may be recited and people may be able to say that God became flesh in Jesus, but it needs narrative to deepen understanding by showing doctrine in specific situations. Narrative preaching communicates doctrine by layering a deeper understanding with each story by showing doctrine in action. Day insists that this is not an abandonment of doctrine but a way of making it live. Great preachers such as George Whitfield turned doctrines into stories.[47] Narrative, visual and textual, can contribute to understanding doctrine. Sarah Worth asserts that it is widely believed that art can generate beliefs about the world and contribute to knowledge of the world, but she admits that justifying such claims is difficult in traditional epistemic terms.[48] Narratives carry doctrine in contextual form, what it does not do is trace a doctrine across Scripture.

7.6.4 Knowing and emotion

The emotional realities of a text are integral to a revelatory approach but emotion does not have a role in traditional epistemology. A revelatory approach draws on the arts which express, refer to and evoke emotions; does this disqualify them as a way of knowing? Although traditional epistemology may not acknowledge the part emotion plays in thinking, its role in learning is increasingly recognized in other fields. Reid sees emotion as part of cognition, he terms coming to know through the arts as 'cognitive feeling' or 'felt cognition'.[49] Coming to know in terms of Polanyi's personal knowledge includes emotion, for it is passion that drives the knower to know.[50] Without emotion learning is dull, for it is emotion that tags significant knowledge and makes it memorable, what Sanford calls 'hot cognition'.[51] The arts do more than express emotion, they marry insights to emotions, making them a more personal form of knowing.

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[46] *The Nicene Creed*, <http://anglicansonline.org/basics/nicene.html> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[47] Day, *Embodying the Word*, pp. 2–3, 63, 103.
[48] Worth, 'Art and Epistemology', (sections 1, 7).
[49] Reid, 'Aesthetic Knowledge', in *The Arts: A Way of Knowing,* ed. by Ross, p. 27.
[50] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* pp. 133–35.
[51] Sanford, *Mind, Brain and Narrative*, pp. 191–193, 201.

Feeling is part of rounding out an insight, making it multidimensional. It can advance understanding and be part of the process of reconfiguring categories as similarities and differences in emotional qualities are identified. Kieran describes the role of emotion in knowing as getting people to care about truths they find in narratives.[52] Being moved or challenged, however, is not enough; Martha Nussbaum acknowledges that the powerful and vivid impressions people gain from narratives need interpreting and that requires cognitive skills.[53] Narrative works are about more than emotion; they can show what something is like, combining both content and feeling though the balance between these can vary.

Narratives, visual and textual, overcome detached and abstract considerations of a subject, but that does not mean generalisation and reflection are not needed; emotion and cognitive skills work together. The emotions art arouses are integral to facilitating knowledge and insights. Norman Rockwell's, *The Problem We All Live With*, arouses feelings of admiration for African American Ruby Bridges in going to an all-white school, but it is the details of the work, its proportions, the rotten tomato, the graffiti, the strong contrast of dark and light and the angle that tell a story about white supremacy. The painting is about the fact of discrimination not just the emotions surrounding it.[54] George Orwell's *1984* creates chilling emotions, but the narrative uses those emotions to help people think through social and political issues.[55]

7.6.5 Emotion and knowing through narrative preaching

Exploring the emotions within a narrative can help a congregation identify with characters and begin to see the situation through their eyes. Feelings are also a way in which links are made with the congregation's experience and relevance is signalled. The emotions evoked need to be appropriate to the nature of the text, but that does not mean they are the same as those in the text, which may be inappropriate. Psalm 137 ends with a desire for horrifying revenge.

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[52] Kieran, 'Aesthetic Knowledge', 369–379 (p. 376).
[53] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 270, 272–73.
[54] Norman Rockwell, *The Problem We All Live With*, 1963, oil on canvas, 91 × 150 cm, Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge <https://www.nrm.org/2011/05/norman-rockwells-the-problem-we-all-live-with/> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[55] George Orwell, *1984* (no publication data, originally published 1949) <https://ia601006.us.archive.org/4/items/1984georgeorwell_201907/1984%20George%20Orwell.pdf> [accessed 22 February 2021]

Emotion has a role to play in preaching without descending to sentimentality. I am defining sentimentality as emotion out of proportion to the subject and often lacking in depth or criticality, though I admit this is not adequate to cover all cases. Sentimentality is notoriously difficult to define, though it is often recognized when experienced. It may be better to describe sentimentality as part of a spectrum, with sentimental at one end and dispassionate at the other.[56] Emotion appropriate to the text ranges between these two poles without inhabiting the extremes. Used appropriately, emotion can highlight important points in a sermon, turning a narrative from monochrome to colour.

Doctrine presented narratively does not have to lack emotion for it is seen in characters' lives. The emotion in a sermon can be built using suitable expressive language, rather than piling on 'purple prose'. It is possible to use the language of emotions without descending into sentimentality, for the sermon should not emotionally overwhelm people reducing their freedom of response. Care needs to be exercised that emotions are not used to manipulate the congregation, for when emotion is linked to a position of power and authority that is a danger.

7.7 Narratives and cognition

An encounter with an artwork or text can be an aesthetic experience but it can also be cognitive in some way. Some people may never get beyond direct experience, but that does not mean they have not come to know at some level, even if the experience has not been analysed and put in conceptual form. For some it may be closer to George Herbert's 'something understood'.[57] If knowledge is restricted to information collecting then the arts have little to contribute. Narrative preaching challenges the view that only accepts articulated concepts and information as knowledge. It champions a way of coming to know that is rooted in experience. More traditional forms of knowledge may cohere logically but may bear little relationship to life. Shakespeare mocked this austere view of knowledge that could not withstand the rigours of experience.

LEONATO   I pray thee peace, I will be flesh and blood;
for there was never yet philosopher

[56] Brian Wilkie, 'What is Sentimentality', *College English,* 28.8 (1967), 564–575 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/374718> [accessed 10 February 2021] (p. 571).

[57] George Herbert, *Prayer* (1) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44371/prayer-i> [accessed 10 February 2021], l. 14.

> that could endure the toothache patiently.[58]

The problem is thinking that is unrelated to life in the body. The knowledge communicated in narrative, visual or textual, is earthed, bodily cognition that draws on the senses. For Polanyi, knowledge is always situated in the body and in a person situated in a culture in society.[59] We look from our bodies out onto the world. An epistemic ideal that isolates thinking from the body is not narrative knowing. W. B. Yeats expressed bodily thinking in his poem *A Prayer for Old Age*.

> God guard me from those thoughts men think
> In the mind alone;
> He that sings a lasting song
> Thinks in the marrow bone. [60]

Goodman believed the arts play their full part in cognition; for him they share the 'top billing' with the sciences. He believed the arts not only fulfil many of the functions of the cognitive, but they also enrich our idea of cognition by the way they function.[61] Goodman's claim that the arts are fundamentally cognitive rests on the semantically dense nature of words and images; they are able to represent shades of meaning. People interact with semantically dense narratives using exemplification, which can develop cognitive abilities. They learn to weigh similarities and differences in terms of significance; people learn to categorize and recognize patterns and reconfigure elements in a way that advances understanding.[62]

Harald Klinke points out that scientists, poets and artists have long held that that illustration used alongside text is not just reproducing the same ideas in another form. Art follows a logic different to language, visual perception has its own form of thinking.[63] Visual and textual narratives structure thought in a way that does not prioritize analysis and technical coherence, but does this mean they cannot argue a case? Images and narratives may not be able to marshal arguments in a traditional way, but by examples and images 'arguments' can be created. Images of the empty

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[58] William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. by A. R. Humphreys (London: Routledge, 1991) <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/much-ado-about-nothing/act-5-scene-1/> [accessed 10 February 2021], v.1. 36–38.
[59] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* pp. 59–60, 203.
[60] William Butler Yeats, *A Prayer for Old Age* <https://allpoetry.com/A-Prayer-For-Old-Age> [accessed 10 February 2021], ll. 1–4.
[61] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), p. 102.
[62] Goodman, *Languages of Art,* pp. 53, 229–240, 245, 252–53.
[63] Harald Klinke, 'The Image and the Mind', in *Art Theory as Visual Epistemology: The Image and the Mind,* ed. by Harald Klinke (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), pp. 1–10 (p.1).

shoes of Holocaust victims argue against any who deny it. The character of Dorothea in *Middlemarch* argues against living a superficial life.[64] This is part of textual and visual art's role in bearing witness.

Visual narratives have cognitive significance on a number of grounds: content, belief clarification, concept formation and classification. Keith Lehrer stresses the content art brings; art shows us what certain things are like.[65] In narratives, textual and visual, vices and virtues take on a specific shape; love, betrayal, sin and loyalty become embodied in people and situations, giving meaning to the words. Kieran points out that narratives not only help us to clarify the nature of beliefs, but they are also capable of revealing genuine insights that may 'cut across the grain' of previous views.[66] Narratives go beyond a confirmatory function in order to challenge with new understandings.

7.7.1 Cognition and knowing through narrative preaching

The Bible shows people coming to know God through direct experience, such as St Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), and through ordinary life. Daniel was challenged by exceptional circumstances (Daniel 6:10) but he did not suddenly come to know God in those circumstances. Faith was developed over the years in daily practices and behaviour. Ian Scott notes Paul's knowledge of mundane life and the internal life. In his epistles Paul speaks of bread and athletes, of generosity and temptation. Paul grants to these ordinary things the status of knowledge gained by observing patterns of behaviour.[67] Preachers can preach this ordinary knowing alongside the more dramatic encounters. In revelatory preaching insights often come through the ordinary.

In revelatory preaching knowledge comes through the body and the material world, including knowledge of doctrine. In the Bible the knower is both situated and embodied, and this is not considered an impediment to cognition.[68] Incarnation is a doctrine of the body, creation is a doctrine of the material world and revelation is a doctrine of God revealing himself through Jesus, the world and humanity. Spirituality is not rising above the body, social relationships or the material world but

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[64] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*.
[65] Keith Lehrer, *Art, Self and Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 9.
[66] Kieran, 'Aesthetic Knowledge', p. 377.
[67] Ian W. Scott, *Paul's Way of Knowing: Story, Experience and the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), pp. 92–94.
[68] Dru Johnson, *Biblical Knowing*, p. 30.

finding God there. Throughout the Bible God is encountered in historical event, nature and in human experience.

In preaching, knowledge not only has to cohere with the 'God sense', the God centred meaning of the text,[69] but also with people's sense of the world, and felt bodily sense. Generally, readers experience a bodily sense when a narrative chimes with bodily life. People can relate to Hannah being so upset she cannot eat, for it taps into a bodily reaction many in the congregation would recognize. In life, the body often learns first and thought comes afterwards. Elizabeth Wendel-Moltmann emphasizes the centrality of the role of the body in Christianity. In the time of Jesus, the Hebrew word 'dabar' related to the body, not just speech; salvation affects more than the soul. Thinking is not apart from the body, for the body is our way of experiencing the world.[70] Revelatory preaching, which is earthed in the senses, can begin to challenge disembodied knowing and the divorce of the spiritual from the material.

The downgrading of bodily knowledge affects Christian thinking and learning. In such a mind-set truth, particularly doctrinal truth, is often perceived as a set of abstract propositions and dependence on the senses as something people leave behind as they develop. Bonnie Miller-McLemore notes that in Western society developmental schemes, such as those devised by James Fowler and Lawrence Kohlberg, class abstract reasoning as mature and stress the cognitive. This attitude marginalises the way many people learn, it downgrades ritual, physical expressions of faith, images, depiction and diverse ways of coming to know.[71]

Revelatory preaching relates to the way life and faith are experienced. Doctrine is lived. It shows situations from the characters' perspective rather than hindsight. This corresponds with the perception of God's working in the world as opaque because God is experienced deep in the complexity and messiness of life. Revelatory preaching recreates a little of the mess. It is in untidy daily experience that doctrine is both learned and practised, though it may not be clarified or articulated. The sermon can give voice to those experiences and show doctrine worked out in the lives of biblical people in a way that validates ordinary knowing.

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[69] Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), p. 13.
[70] Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body: New Ways of Embodiment,* trans. by John Bowden (New York, Continuum, 1995), pp. 37, 84–6.
[71] Bonnie Miller-McLemore, 'Embodied Knowing, Embodied Theology: What Happened to the Body?', *Pastoral Psychology,* 62 (2013), 743–58 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-013-0510-3> (p. 749–51).

Concepts such as faithfulness, hope and forgiveness can be earthed and embodied in characters and situations. Characters can act as exemplars without them ceasing to be people in their own right. A character may display certain qualities and by coming to know those qualities people can learn to recognize them in different situations. Characters should stand in their own right and not be 'dropped' in favour of looking at the quality abstractly.

7.8 Generalising knowing

Several aspects of narrative knowing are perceived as a hindrance to generalising knowledge; they are subjectivity, specificity, and indeterminacy. Each of these is emphasized in revelatory preaching. Narratives are specific, they deal in particular people at particular times in specific places. Can such a specific form be widened into more generalised knowing? Truth may be specific but Goodman's exemplification, as already discussed, suggests a way of generalising knowledge without losing specificity, it allows readers and viewers to go beyond the immediate context to understand the world beyond the text or artwork. Michelangelo's *Unfinished Slaves* are as potent today as they were in the sixteenth century, and can speak of escaping many types of slavery, though Michael Austin admits that may not have been Michelangelo's intention.[72] Michelangelo achieves this by the specificity of the portrayal of slaves struggling to escape their prisons of stone, not in spite of it. This sounds counter-intuitive, but specificity can aid generalisation and relevance. The specific nature of narrative draws people in and enables understanding and often empathy, even though the readers' life experience is different to the character in the narrative. The more specific the portrayal, the easier it is to identify. A more abstract presentation can leave people on the outside looking in.

Traditionally, subjectivity is perceived as detrimental to knowledge, but it has an important role in coming to know. To try and grasp something like love by a detached, objective form of knowing misses the very essence of love. Jacob Myers advocates love as a way of knowing that is expressed as a yearning to know that refuses to dominate, objectify and totalise. It is not consumerist; it is about gift and a sense of epiphany. There is a decentred longing to know that rejects mastery; it is an encounter. The preacher approaches the Word driven by love first, rather than a

[72] Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art,* p. 13. Michelangelo, *Unfinished Slaves,* 1520–1534, marble sculptures, 267, 256, 263, 277 cm, Galleria Accademia, Florence <http://www.accademia.org/explore-museum/artworks/ michelangelos-prisoners-slaves/> [accessed 10 February 2021].

desire for information. Myers talks of the temptation 'to love the text just long enough for the Word to appear, only to seize it and trap it, forcing it into submission.'[73]

Life cannot be studied at a distance. Although there is a degree of subjectivity in coming to know, that does not mean that knowledge is relative. Knowledge can be subjective, but it is not a private possession. Coming to know within a community and within a framework of a dynamic tradition tempers subjectivity. The use of cognitive skills as part of coming to know also balances subjectivity. If people genuinely come into contact with reality through narrative, then it has what Polanyi calls 'universal intent'. The origins of this broader truth claim lie in a subjective and particular experience that discloses something 'real'. If contact is made with reality it reaches beyond the subjective to a shared reality.[74] As people engage with narratives, they both relate to the immediate experience of the text and relate it to themselves and the world, 'toggling' between the two.

Indeterminacy can also be perceived as creating a problem, but for Polanyi, the indeterminacy of words is unavoidable, for we can never say all we know and 'only words of indeterminate meaning can have a bearing on reality'. The reality to which we relate we understand only partially, so our words cannot be precise.[75] This insight frees preachers in their use of language. Exactitude is not always necessary. In narrative, 'precise enough' is often enough. Indeterminacy and ambiguity are integral to the Bible, as they are to life. Parables are rarely explained and the disciples are told that people may 'listen but not understand' (Mark 4:12).

If narratives, visual and textual, can communicate truth, can they also distort truth? How is a narrative tested? Martha Nussbaum describes arriving at narrative truth by 'a surge of recognition'.[76] Similarly, John Keats talked of proving it on the pulse,[77] testing against experience, saying, 'is this true to life?' The problem with this approach is that it makes human experience the final arbiter. People also vary in their experience and the question arises whether narrative is tested by general experience or redeemed experience; Christians maintain that sin and death have been defeated

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[73] Jacob D. Myers, 'Erotic Preaching: Phenomenological Insights for Preaching', *Theology Today*, 77.4 (2021) 393-407 (2021) <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0040573620956725> (pp. 394, 397-400).
[74] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* pp. 37, 150, 311, 315.
[75] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 95, 251–53.
[76] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 254.
[77] *Letters of John Keats to his Family and Friends*, *Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds* (Teignmouth, 1818), ed. by Sidney Colvin <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35698/35698-h/35698-h.htm#LII> [accessed 10 February 2021], p. 105. Gutenberg ebook.

by Christ but outside the Christian framework that is contra to experience. There is no single test that validates general truths communicated in narratives, but they can be put before the Bible and tradition, community and experience.

7.8.1 How can revelatory preaching generalise?

Revelatory preaching allows the Bible to speak from its concrete situations to contemporary situations as a form of generalisation that shows it is relevant to different circumstances. People look for analogous experience where the truth of a narrative may apply. When an insight is gained, the focus then goes to the whole and how the insight relates to the whole narrative. Many of the specifics retreat to subsidiary status but those that relate to the insight are retained at focal level and they play their part in displaying meaning. The preacher does not preach the insight devoid of the specifics that led to it. Generalisation in this form of preaching lies in the expression of an instance, something particular and specific. Whalley expresses this as, 'the more minutely and particularly the unique event is rendered, the more luminously it implies the universality of the universal.'[78] Specificity can assist generalisation because it is particular enough for people to relate to; it is hard to relate to generalities such as 'sinners', 'forgiveness' and 'joy'.

After immersion in the particulars of a text, there is a stepping back in reflection, for that is how people move from specific experience to generality. We are too close when we indwell a text or experience. Preaching needs both immersion and reflection. When this combination is preached, the congregation need time to both indwell and reflect; they need time to be touched by the characters and their situation before making links to more general experience.

Some works help with 'toggling' between text and experience by anachronism that can show relevance and enable generalisation without breaking narrative form. Paul Scott Wilson cautions against transposing whole narratives into contemporary form, for that can create problems; the congregation may lose the biblical connection. He suggests small touches that he calls 'blending', which should not distract or overwhelm.[79]

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[78] Whalley, *Poetic Process*, p. 134.
[79] Paul Scott Wilson, *Broken Words,* pp. 64–65.

7.9 Language issues

Language has a role to play in coming to know. Martha Nussbaum describes Plato's ideal speech as 'lucid, spare and pure'; it is language that strives to stimulate the intellect and avoid expressions of emotion and stylistic devices such as rhythm and imagery that may encourage feelings and imagination. Plato's ideal language stresses coherence and general principles and puts a premium on precision and explanation. This is the language of traditional epistemology. It is not the language of narrative.[80] Narrative language does not have the lean, clean and convergent nature described by Plato. Imaginative language is dense and polysemous, allowing room for interpretations and an invitational approach. The figurative language of revelatory preaching is not without precision, it is able to address the nuances of situations and capture emotions by a poetic form of precision. John Donne's 'No man is an island' captures something about humanity that saying 'we are connected' misses.[81] Creative language enables people to grasp the qualities of life in a way that literal language does not. This raises the issue of how creative language can be both precise and yet multivalent and indeterminate. George Whalley describes two types of precision, scientific and poetic. Scientific and technical precision he labels as 'single track', it is unemotional, logical, unambiguous and words tend to have single meaning or reference (the language of traditional epistemology). In such knowledge there is an emphasis on abstraction and generalisation and language is not personal. Poetic precision is language in an I-Thou relationship; it shows relationships between things and relationships to reality. Poetic precision is the expression of the particularity of a thing, person or instance. Poetic language has emotional tone and it is embodied; it brings knowledge through synthesis.[82]

Although I have distinguished between a scientific language and creative, figurative language, Eco expresses a timely warning that language forms are not completely distinct. Propositional referential language can 'acquire' emotions and emotive language can be referential. Language works in both modes and this 'double nature' can confer depth and openness to a text.[83]

Imaginative language, visual and textual, is a distinctive feature of narrative and employs its own metaphorical way of knowing; it helps people think,

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[80] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, pp. 249–251.
[81] John Donne, *Devotions on Emergent Occasions, Meditation XVII* <http://www.public-library.uk/ebooks/28/27.pdf > [accessed 10 February 2021], p. 36.
[82] Whalley, *Poetic Process*, pp. 119–134.
[83] Eco, *The Open Work*, pp. 35, 39.

reconfigure, consider and communicate truths. To call false rumours ‘poison’ is more powerful than saying they are harmful, for the word ‘poison’ brings in other associations from the poison domain: its deadly nature, its spreading through the body, there is not always an antidote. In his *Supper at Emmaus* Caravaggio painted a basket of autumn fruit, including an apple speckled with decay teetering on the edge of a table. He was saying more than our world is flawed and teetering on the edge; the visual metaphor harks back to Eden and the autumn fruit domain has connotations of harvest and judgement.[84]

The use of creative language helps to highlight aspects of a text that are overlooked as a result of familiarity. We do not notice what we do not notice. Visual and textual highlighting helps us to apply what Leher calls ‘aesthetic attention’. This is a conscious attention to an experience or an aspect of experience that enables people to rethink and reconfigure. In revelatory preaching there is a focussing of attention on sensory details that opens up a narrative so that people can explore both its content and meaning. This can lead to a degree of re-experiencing an event. Without conscious experience there may be discursive knowledge, but such knowledge is incomplete. It is like being able to describe and define a colour without actually experiencing it.[85]

Imagination plays a role in knowing, people follow imaginative intuitions and postulate possible explanations and alternatives. Narrative knowing relies on imagination. ‘Because we have seen, heard, and felt, we can imagine things we have not seen, heard, or felt.[86] Although religion and art are distinct, Michael Austin claims that they may share a similar way of coming to know involving faith and intuition. In religion it can be a form of ‘direct awareness’.[87]

7.9.1 Language and knowing in narrative preaching

The creative language of revelatory peaching can enable people to indwell a biblical narrative and reflect on it. This approach is not appropriate for all biblical narratives, some are too sensitive to indwell for pastoral reasons. This is not a case for avoiding such texts, it concerns the appropriate approach. The Bible is rich in imaginative

[84] Caravaggio, *The Supper at Emmaus.*
[85] Lehrer, *Art, Self and Knowledge*, pp. 32–33.
[86] Sharon L. Pugh, Jean Wolph Hicks and Marcia_Davis, *Metaphorical Ways of Knowing: The Imaginative Nature of Thought and Expression* (Urbana: The National Council of Teachers of English, 1997), p. 13.
[87] Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art,* pp. 40–41.

metaphors that can be used to highlight aspects of a narrative and help people think through an issue. ‘A wolf in sheep’s clothing’ (Matthew 7.15) can help people think about how we know a person is genuine. Non-biblical images can also be employed to encourage thinking. Trevor Mwamba uses the image of dress.

> We all dress up before God and others to hide the truth about ourselves.
> The dress of status
> The dress of learning
> The dress of power
> The dress of race
> The dress of self-righteousness
> […]
> The dress of disappointments and shattered dreams.’[88]

Highlighting overlooked elements of narrative with language can jolt both preacher and congregation out of predictable ways of thinking or can reinvigorate thinking with new power. An example of this is the word ‘sinner’ in the story of Jesus’ anointing. Christians are used to the word ‘sinner’ being attached to the woman in the story of Jesus’ anointing (Luke 7:36–50). The course of the conversation during the meal makes it clear Jesus thought differently.

> Simon invited Jesus to a meal
> but as far as Jesus was concerned
> he had just eaten one more meal with sinners -
> and the woman wasn’t eating.[89]

Revelatory narrative preaching draws on a number of epistemologies, which means that epistemic etiquette is particularly important for what is a virtue in one epistemology may be a vice in another. The two types of knowing can ally rather than compete to create a rounded form of coming to know through narrative.
For the more personal and aesthetic knowledge Nussbaum suggests that there is a need to be ‘humble, open, active yet porous’.[90] There is also a sense of letting go of control. It is not forcing a text to give up its riches in terms of meaning. Billy Collins talks of people tying a poem to a chair and beating the meaning out of it.[91] Preachers

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[88] Trevor Mwamba, *Dancing Sermons* (London: SPCK, 2007), p. 26.
[89] Margaret Cooling, *Jesus is Anointed: Known* <https://preachpreach.com/2018/10/10/jesus-is-anointed-known/> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[90] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 282.
[91] Billy Collins, ‘Introduction to Poetry’, in *The Apple that Astonished Paris* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1988/1996) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46712/introduction-to-poetry> [accessed 10 February 2021].

can become so desperate as Sunday approaches that the text suffers the same fate. Texts, as well as congregations, need a non-coercive approach. There is a waiting on the Holy Spirit, an acknowledgement that knowledge is not to be grasped, there can be revelation alongside active seeking; it is not an either/or choice. The appropriate attitudes in coming to know a text are respect, responsibility and patience. The knower cultivates commitment and trust alongside a willingness to take risks and question accepted patterns. The world and the text are allowed to disclose themselves in their own way. It is a form of knowing that is reciprocal, where the knower is willing to answer questions the text poses, as well as asking questions of the text.

Once the narrative is experienced and an insight is gained, the more traditional ways of coming to know require preachers to step back, reflect, look at the big picture, analyse, explain and clarify, although the knowledge that comes from this may be presented differently in the sermon. The etiquette appropriate to this epistemology is a certain distance, an openness to validation and questioning, a willingness to re-think. This stage has a sense of control not appropriate to the initial stages.

7.10 Revelation

Revelation is an aspect of knowing, there is a two-way process; our search for knowledge is one side of the coin, God's revelation is the other. Revelation does not mean Christians do not have to engage in the work of seeking understanding. The search for knowledge does not negate revelation. Revelation can be either direct or indirect; it can be propositional or personal.

7.10.1 Direct special revelation

Special revelation centres primarily on the revelation of God through Jesus Christ as witnessed in Scripture and mediated by the Spirit. The letter to the Hebrews opens with the statement that, 'God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets and in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.' (Hebrews 1:1–2). This acknowledges that revelation has been ongoing and in various forms but now God is revealed through one particular person, Jesus Christ. The language of John 1.18 is revelatory, 'No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.' Hans Urs von Balthasar, commenting on Barth's view of revelation,

describes it as like an hourglass, the centre of the hourglass is the meeting point in Christ. Revelation flows from God through Christ to humanity.[92]

Jesus, as the Son of God, can reveal God; like reveals like. However, Colin Gunton queries the wider principle that like can only be known by like, for that means that God can only be known by something or someone God-like, whereas in the Gospels God is made known by things that are unGod-like, such as death on a cross and humiliation. The Spirit enables God to be known through the humanity of Jesus and the physical realities of his life, death and resurrection.[93] Once the possibility of knowing God through the ungodlike is conceded, learning *something* of God through other people and human situations and culture becomes a possibility. This is important for a revelatory approach that focuses on characters and their material situations as presented in scriptural narrative.

7.10.2 Indirect general revelation

General revelation is God's revealing of himself outside Scripture and the Church, but it raises the issue of what type of knowing can be gained through this type of revelation. There are various types of general revelation: God is revealed by his actions in nature and history, an innate sense, and general revelation through creation. A revelatory approach assumes some form of general revelation as its insights come from settings, people, art and situations. However, general revelation is not without its problems.

One form of general revelation is when God is revealed by *actively* using nature as in the case of the burning bush (Exodus 3) and the storm on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:18). Helm admits that actions reveal something about the actor, but an interpretative framework is needed, 'actions without propositions are dumb.'[94] This seems to be an overstatement in favour of propositions, but some interpretive framework is needed. Generally, in the Bible God is perceived as acting through nature; a drought is accompanied by a prophetic word that names it as sent by God (Amos 4:6–8). The understanding that God acts through nature did not end with the Bible, it is evidenced throughout history, but such events may lead to diametrically

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[92] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*. 3rd edn, trans. by John Dury (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1971) <https://archive.org/details/theologyofkarlba00balt/page/n5/mode/2up> [accessed 10 February 2021], p. 170. Internet Archive ebook.
[93] Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation: The 1993 Warfield Lectures* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), pp. 118, 122–25.
[94] Helm, *The Divine Revelation*, p. 16.

opposed interpretations. The wind that aided the defeat of the Spanish Armada was celebrated with a medal engraved with the words, ‘He [God] blew they were scattered’.[95] Would the Spanish have attributed the wind to God?

Similar to this is the second form of general revelation, the idea that God reveals himself by acting in history. This form of revelation also has a biblical basis, God is shown as ruling over national destinies (Isaiah 10:1–13). Wolfhart Pannenberg advocated historical revelation based on God’s action in Israel’s history and in Jesus. He concedes that the interpretation of events will not be completely understood until the end of revelatory history.[96] Erickson also stresses the action of God in history and he surmises that it should be possible to detect the work of God in events but admits accessibility to this is limited.[97] God acting through history is open to a range of interpretations. Constantine interpreted his success at the battle of Milvian Bridge to God. Not everyone has viewed that victory in the same light.

A third form of general revelation is an innate sense of God in humanity that may indicate a general form of revelation. Helm points out that if it is innate, it should be universal and although it seems to be widespread, universal cannot be proved and it does not necessarily tell us anything about God. [98] Erickson relates this to Romans 2:11–16, where Paul describes the law as written on the human heart. This may indicate that humans have a ‘moral impulse’ although people have differing moral codes.[99] Gunton discusses human rationality as a contender for an innate form of general revelation; humanity experiences the world as a place of revelation in the sense that creation reveals itself in ways comprehensible to the human mind. The compatibility of human rationality and the way the universe works could be an element of general revelation.[100]

A fourth form of general revelation is through the silent witness of creation rather that God actively manipulating natural forces. The idea that God can be known through creation is rooted in the doctrine of the creator God. Creation should bear the

[95] Gerard van Bylaer, *Medal Commemorating the Defeat of the Spanish Armada,* 1588, silver, 51 mm, The Royal Museums Greenwich, London. <https://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/37452.html> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[96] Wolfhart Pannenberg, ‘Dogmatic Thesis on the Doctrine of Revelation’, in *Revelation as History,* ed. by Wolfhart Pannenberg in association with Rolf Rendtorff, Trutz Rendtorff, and Ulrich Wilckens, trans. by David Granskou, (New York: Macmillan, 1968) <https://archive.org/details/revelationashist0000pann/page/n5/mode/2up> [accessed 18 February 2021], pp. 131, 135–39. Internet Archive ebook.
[97] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 123
[98] Helm, *The Divine Revelation*, pp. 17–18.
[99] Erickson, *Christian Theology,* pp. 124.
[100] Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation,* pp. 57–58.

mark of divine handiwork, but it is not easy to define what aspect of creation reflects God. Hans Urs von Balthasar saw beauty as a key mark of God.[101] Order is another possibility.[102] Helm sees creation as a form of revelation, as indicated in the nature Psalms, such as Psalm 8 and 19:1–6, and Romans 2:14–15. However, without a framework based on special revelation, people may only come to a basic sense of God. For Helm, the Bible only endorses a minimalist general revelation and the knowledge gained is non-redemptive.[103] Gunton admits the limitations of general revelation; creation does not automatically reveal God. He describes the Bible as acting as a pair of glasses with which people are able to recognize general revelation for what it is. Gunton widens the way the natural world reveals by including scientific theories and the arts as well as nature. Science and art reveal something of the way the world is, 'culture is a mark of the world's createdness.' The 'secular' aspects of the world, as well as the overtly religious aspects, are significant for understanding the world's ability to be a means of revelation. Mozart's music has a revelatory quality, but it does not try to teach; the music itself praises. The world is thus potentially revelatory of God.[104]

If the 'secular' aspects of the world have the potential to be revelatory in some way, this opens up large parts of texts as relevant. The Bible is full of verses that refer to the generosity of God (Luke 6:38; I Timothy 6:17). It is this doctrine of a generous God that David Brown links to general revelation. If God is truly generous, it is natural to expect to find him at work in the world in a way that people can respond to in some way. This suggest that people can gain insights from the world without perceiving it as a threat to special revelation. David Brown describes this as the 'enchantment' of the world. The loss of a broad belief in general revelation in a secular age has led to a decrease in a sense of relevance of much of human experience. Sport, drama and homelife where once viewed as places where God could be encountered. The world was 'read' as God's second book.[105]

There is a spectrum of views concerning God's revelation in the world, this thesis rests on a broad revelatory structure to life, at least in potential, seeing God's revealing action in creation, human relationships, culture, experience, history, event

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[101] Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'The Glory of the Lord', vol 1, 'Seeing the Form', in *Theological Aesthetics*: *A Reader*, ed. by Gesa E. Thiessen (London: SCM, 2004), pp. 320–325.
[102] McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p. 159.
[103] Helm, *The Divine Revelation*, pp. 27–31, 35.
[104] Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, pp. 26–27, 29–30, 60, 62.
[105] David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, pp. 6–10, 33.

and science. I acknowledge that access to these is variable and special revelation works alongside general revelation as an interpretive framework.

7.10.3 Personal revelation

Revelation can take two forms: knowledge of a person in a relationship and knowledge about a person, usually in propositional form, although neither of these views is exclusive. Personal revelation can include propositions and propositional statements can include a personal aspect. This is important for revelatory preaching as narrative preaching is sometimes accused of not being able to communicate propositional truth in the form of doctrine. If revelation is personal then revelatory preaching's emphasis on characters in relationship with God and each other presents the possibility of revelation of doctrine in a personal form.

In the Old Testament the relationship with God is expressed in national covenants (Joshua 24:1-28) and in individual, personal relationships. Abraham walks before God (Gen:17:1), Moses speaks to God face to face, as to a friend (Exodus 33:11) and Jeremiah and Ezekiel speak of a new relationship based on the heart (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Ezekiel 36:26). What the Old Testament looked forward to and knew sporadically, the New Testament widens to all people.

Prokes registers that in recent years the personal form of revelation has received more attention and there is a general move in theology towards a relational view.[106] Hilkert, in discussing the difference between Protestant and Catholic views of revelation, points to Karl Rahner as one of the thinkers who was influential in moving Catholic thinking about revelation from a largely doctrinal, propositional position to a more relational, trinitarian, sacramental and incarnational one. 'Fundamentally graced' is Hilkert's assessment of Rahner's more sacramental view.[107] Rahner contrasts the intellectual informational view of revelation put forward by Vatican I and the more 'person to person' formulation of revelation in Vatican II. It is God's revelation of himself in Christ, an act of grace and love.[108]

McGrath emphasizes that the key question in the New Testament is not 'what must I know?' but 'what must I do to be saved? (Acts 16:30).[109] The response to that

[106] Prokes, *Toward a Theology of the Body*, p. 74.
[107] Hilkert, *Naming Grace*, pp. 31–33.
[108] Karl Rahner, *Sacramentum Mundi*: *An Encyclopedia of Theology,* ed. by Karl Rahner and others, 6 vols, (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1970) <https://archive.org/details/sacramentummundi0000unse/page/n5/mode/2up> [accessed 10 February 2021] V (1970), pp. 342–359 (pp. 344–349). Internet Archive ebook.
[109] McGrath, *Christian Theology,* p. 152.

question is sometimes expressed in terms of knowledge but it is knowledge of God in relationship. Throughout the Bible the concerns are around a relationship with God both for Israel as a nation and people individually. In revelatory preaching truth is revealed through exploring God's relationship with people and communities expressed through material existence.

For Barth revelation is personal to the extent that revelation is when God meets people in Jesus Christ. Belief does not rest on human initiative or faith; it is God's initiative and faith is a gift. Revelation cannot be reached by reason alone, though it is not illogical. Human concepts are inadequate to grasp knowledge of God. Revelation depends on God making himself known. Faith includes knowledge of facts, but human knowledge is always limited. Humanity cannot reach an understanding of God from creation, for Barth, the world is a 'dark mirror'.[110]

Mark Beach describes Barth's view of revelation as entirely 'other', it is absolute and universal, and God is subject not object. He emphasizes revelation as an event and action, a personal disclosure by God. If revelation is an event, it cannot be trapped within the pages of a book reliant on fallible human authors; it is active not static. God may choose to use the words of Scripture to reveal Jesus Christ at which point it becomes revelation.[111] Helm illustrates Barth's position as follows, 'Christ bore our sins in his own body on the tree' becomes the revealed Word of God when John Smith reads them as, 'John Smith, Christ bore *your* sins in his own body on the tree.' Barth's stress on revelation as an event means it cannot be described as propositions with a fixed meaning. When an attempt is made to record revelation, as in the Bible, it just becomes the record of revelation.[112]

Barth's restriction of revelation to a personal encounter initiated by God isolates revelation; how are such revelations to be verified? If the Bible is used to verify revelation that puts God's revelation under a book that Barth regards as flawed. Gunton points out that Barth's assertion that only God can reveal God detracts from the revelation of God through the humanity of Jesus.[113] Beach sees Barth's position as a form of docetism, for Barth is so concerned to preserve the sovereignty of God that he is unwilling to trust God's revelation to anyone but God.

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[110] Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, pp. 7–9, 15–16, 43.
[111] J. Mark Beach, 'Revelation in Scripture: Some Comments on Karl Barth's Doctrine of Revelation', *MJT,* 17 (2006), 267–274 <http://www.midamerica.edu/uploads/files/pdf/journal/17-beach.pdf> [accessed 10 February 2021] (p. 268–71).
[112] Helm, *The Divine Revelation*, pp. 59–60.
[113] Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, p. 5.

He views human authors and nature as unable to carry such a load, for the revelation may be misunderstood, subject to human minds and manipulated. In sharp contrast to Barth's caution, the incarnation and the creation reveal a God who was prepared to take the risk and was misunderstood and spurned.[114]

7.10.5 Propositional revelation

Revelation in the form of propositions has been the major position of theology in the past, this is particularly true of the Catholic and Evangelical traditions. This relates to traditional epistemology and skills. For Evangelicals, propositional faith rests on the Bible, for Catholics it resides in tradition and the Magisterium of the Church.[115] It is this form of doctrine that tends to be foremost in expository preaching but not in narrative preaching. Helm is an example of a scholar who sees revelation as primarily propositional. This view of revelation has been attacked as too static, timeless and abstract but as Helm points out, propositions do not have to be divorced from their historical, temporal and cultural contexts. The distinction between propositions and persons is not absolute, propositions can be dynamic, they are often the utterance of a person and they can demand a response. Timeless statements are just something that remains true despite different contexts and times.[116]

Gunton points to creedal statements as the place where many people meet propositions; doctrine presented in this way is sometimes the target of criticism for being static and reducing revelation to the abstract and cognitive. Gunton proposes 'stable' as an alternative word to static. Stable is about having a reliable foundation on which to stand and that can be dynamic. Doctrines can be reliable although they are always an incomplete representation of reality. Gunton acknowledges that propositional statements can reduce revelation to abstract knowledge, but propositions do not have to be abstract, some are communicated through narrative. Within the creeds there are affirmations that describe events or actions and others that are about the persons of the trinity. They contain statements that are always true, yet they are flexible enough to allow for future expansion and development. The statements themselves are not revelation but they can be revelatory for they are secondary; they exist in the primary context of a relationship with a personal God.[117]

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[114] Beach, 'Revelation in Scripture', 267–274 (pp. 272–74).
[115] McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p. 154.
[116] Helm, *The Divine Revelation,* pp. 37–41.
[117] Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, pp. 8–9, 11–15, 18, 100.

Revelation can be primarily personal with propositions providing an interpretive framework for the relationship. Propositions can serve the relationship rather than revelation itself being primarily propositional. How people think about revelation matters for a person's understanding of revelation is to a degree reflected in their faith. Erickson suggests that if revelation is propositional, faith tends to be assent; if revelation is personal, revelation tends to be an act of commitment.[118] This is rather simplistic, but understandings of revelation do affect the way faith is held and expressed. Bruce talks of response that is 'congruent' with the form of revelation, which is a more nuanced relationship.[119] Special and general revelation, propositional and personal can be defined in terms of differing roles and emphases rather than dichotomies. The Bible is clear, revelation comes in various ways; it centres on the work of God in Christ as witnessed in Scripture but revelation can also come through creation, history, human relationships and culture. This gives the revelatory approach a broad understanding of revelation on which to draw and sees large areas of human life as relevant in revelatory terms as well as revelation through Scripture and direct encounters with God. Revelatory preaching stands on a broad view of revelation interpreted through the special revelation of God in Christ and mediated through Scripture. This broad understanding licenses learning from the world and its people, a scope that is crucial for preaching in a revelatory style.

7.11 Conclusion

This chapter sought to respond to issues of epistemology raised by a revelatory style. This has involved exploring different ways of knowing; personal, intuitive, non-linear, implicit and imaginative, without jettisoning traditional epistemic skills. This chapter described understanding and recognition as goals of knowledge, where the new was developed through synthesis, pattern recognition and reconfiguration. This section also aimed to link knowing to the ways in which people learn, which is embodied, through experience and involves emotion. The resulting epistemology authenticates ordinary knowing and learning rather than emphasising the objective, 'neutral' knowledge of traditional epistemology. Relating different ways of knowing to revelatory preaching needs a broad epistemology to cover its artistic, personal and embodied form. A revelatory approach can deepen knowledge through

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[118] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pp. 157–8.
[119] Bruce, 'The Vital Importance of the Imagination', p. 72.

understanding, it can thicken knowledge by making connections and it holds out the possibility of new knowledge by synthesis and reconfiguration. These routes to knowledge relate to ways of knowing reflected in the Bible where knowledge is personal, lived, and tested in the fires of experience. The revelatory plot's specificity aids generalisation of knowledge and its creative use of language and imagination enables a form of poetic precision that can evoke recognition from the hearer, affirming 'that is what life is like'.

This chapter also sought to explore revelation as the counterpart to knowing; we seek to know and knowledge is revealed. The nature of revelation is varied but it centres on personal revelation of God in Christ but the generosity of God means people can come to know through the witness of creation, history, culture, science and the world.

The final chapter follows up issues around the imagination. Imagination is crucial to the revelatory approach as texts have to be turned into 'living texts' and crafted with creative language to display a 'slice of narrative life'. The following chapter engages with some of the hesitations preachers may have in according the imagination such a pivotal role.

Chapter Eight
Responses to the Challenges Raised by Imagination

Imagination is involved in every part of revelatory preaching, which provides a framework for the exercise of the imagination and the objective of this chapter is to free preachers to use their imagination in the preparation of sermons whilst staying faithful to Scripture. In the light of this objective, I consider hesitations people may have concerning using the imagination in a preaching context and I seek to respond to those anxieties by deepening the understanding of what imagination is, how it functions and its relationship to fantasy. This involves investigating the scriptural foundation of imagination, the issue of the freedom of the imagination and the witness of Christian attitudes toward the imagination down the ages. The final section of this chapter aims to explore three areas relating to imagination and theology: God as creator, the imago Dei and imagination and revelation. As with previous chapters, this chapter looks at the contribution of imagination in delivering an embodied approach that is invitational and relevant.

8.1 Imagination and preaching

Imagination is involved in all stages of preaching, from preparation to performance, from crafting a sermon to its hearing. Stephen Edmondson, surveying Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s writing on preaching, notes how he saw imagination’s involvement throughout preaching. Imagination is involved at the beginning with the initial reading of Scripture, for imagination is involved in the symbolic knowing that much of Scripture uses. Imagination awakens people to the spiritual in the world and is involved in communicating insights in a sermon. It is imaginative hearing that enables the congregation to receive the sermon. Coleridge saw preaching as an intersection of imaginations; the imagination of writers of Scripture, the Church, the preacher, and the congregation. For Coleridge, the earthiness of Scripture is not left behind in preaching; it is precisely in and through this earthiness that imagination can help the congregation perceive spiritual reality.[1] Charles Rice expresses this broad view of imagination.

[1] Stephen Edmondson, ‘Coleridge and Preaching a Theological Imagination’, *Journal of Anglican Studies,* 3.1 (2005), 75–94 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1740355305052823> (pp. 80–83, 86–88).

> Our access to the text is, in the first place, by way of imagination. If we have an *experience* of the text, allow ourselves to be led deeply into its images — in our mind's eye to *see* its people, places, and things — to experience its language as a new dawning, there is every likelihood that the resulting sermon will, in form and content, rely upon and awaken the imagination.'[2]

Revelatory preaching draws on imagination in all its aspects. Imagination is crucial when the biblical narrative is reimagined as a 'living text', it is exercised in the use of creative language and it is involved in selecting and shaping material to present a 'slice of life' in a sermon. Sacramental imagination is involved in the particularity and earthiness of revelatory preaching for it takes sacramental imagination to see the world as 'graced', a place where God can be met. The congregation uses imagination to fill in gaps in a narrative as the order is not necessarily sequential and time may be treated creatively. Drawing on art as a source for models of the revelatory plot engages the preacher's visual imagination, which intersects with the imagination of the artist. Both preacher and congregation need imagination to connect the biblical world with the contemporary one.

8.2 Text, image and fantasy

Although Margaret Miles highlights the differences between visual and textual imagination, she maintains that both are needed, and they form a spectrum of imagination rather than being opposites.[3] Visual and textual imagination can work in complementary ways. Richard Eslinger talks of a 'fluid affinity' that exists between textual narratives and images; text evokes images and images imply narratives.[4] In this general discussion of imagination much that is stated concerning textual imagination also applies to imagination expressed in images.

In popular parlance imagination is linked to being creative and sometimes to make-believe. This latter category is often classed as fantasy, which is not the subject at issue here. Garrett Green describes fantasy as the illusory side of imagination, 'deliberately fanciful' and a form of imagination that departs from the real world. The other side of imagination, the aspect that revelatory preaching uses, is linked to truth and discovery and relates to real things that may not be present but could be.

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[2] Charles Rice, 'Shaping the Sermon by the Interplay of Text and Metaphor', in *Preaching Biblically*, ed. by Wardlaw, pp. 101–120 (pp. 104).

[3] Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1985), pp. 34.

[4] Richard L. Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination: Preaching the Worlds That Shape Us* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 82.

Imagination is used for creating details that the text does not afford. The distinction between imagination and fantasy is not, however, clear cut but Garrett Green maintains that people can usually distinguish between them. He quotes our ability to distinguish between scientific projections (imagination) and science fiction (fantasy).[5]

8.3 Imagination and the Bible

The Bible is often assumed to have a negative view of imagination, which leaves some preachers wary of its use in sermons and would preclude them from using a revelatory approach. Preachers, particularly from an evangelical tradition, need a ``````scriptural warrant for using the imagination. Unfortunately, there is no single biblical word that correlates to the contemporary use of the word imagination, a variety of words are used throughout the Bible. The following understandings of the biblical etymology of imagination draw on the work of Kate Bruce, Garret Green and Alison Searle.

In the Old Testament there are references to evil imagination. In Genesis 8:21 God says, 'the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth' (Genesis 8:21 KJV).[6] *Yatsar,* the Hebrew word that lies behind many of the instances of imagination, is used of both God and humanity. It means to form, purpose and create and is not by definition evil, it depends on how it is used. This is sometimes indicated by translating *yatsar* as 'inclination', as in the NRSV translation of Genesis 8:21. Several other Hebrew words are used to cover the modern concept of imagination; each has multiple meanings. The meaning of *Máskiyth* can range from idol to imagination (Leviticus 26:1; Proverbs 18.11). *Machăshăbăh* has meanings ranging from plan and thought to invention and can have good or evil intent (Proverbs 6:18; Exodus 35:35). The most common word that covers many aspects of the imagination is *leb*, the word for heart, will, mind, understanding and the inner person. It can be positive or negative. In Genesis 8:21 *leb* appears twice, once used of God and once of humanity. In relation to God, it refers to inward deliberation, in

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[5] Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 63–64.
[6] *Holy Bible*, King James Version (London: Cambridge University Press, 1611/n.d.)

reference to humanity it is named as evil in this verse, but this is not the overall verdict; the heart can be wicked (Jeremiah 17:9) or wise (Ecclesiastes 10:2).[7]

The New Testament is equally diverse in the words used to cover aspects of imagination. In the Magnificat Mary describes God's action as scattering the proud 'in the imagination of their hearts' (Luke 1:51 KJV).[8] The Greek word *dianoia* is used in this verse and ranges over meanings as diverse as mind, feeling, understanding and desiring. *Dialogismos* carries ideas such as plotting, doubting, reasoning and thinking. This word is used in Romans 1:21(KJV) where Paul talks of people becoming 'vain in their imaginations'.[9] The NRSV translates this as 'futile in their thinking'. In Acts 17:29, Paul comments, 'we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.' Here Paul uses the term *enthymesis,* usually translated thought, deliberation or idea. It can be used positively or negatively. Like the Old Testament, the New Testament word for heart, *kardia*, is widely used for facets of imagination and can have both good and evil intentions. Mark 7:21 talks of evil proceeding from the heart, but Luke 10:27 reiterates the Old Testament injunction to love God with all your heart.[10]

Kate Bruce, Paul Scott Wilson, Alison Searle and Garret Green identify *kardia* and *leb* as key terms in apprehending the Bible's understandings of imagination and attitudes towards it. The biblical understanding of heart is broad. The heart is the seat of thought, will and worship; it is the centre of emotion, belief and decision making. The heart has an ethical dimension in guiding behaviour, a spiritual dimension in relationship to God and an intellectual role in reasoning. It is the place where God's word dwells (Deuteronomy 30:14), where God's new law is written (Jeremiah 31:33) and where the light of God shines (II Corinthians 4:6). The 'imagination of the heart' involves the whole person and Paul Scott Wilson sees it as the centre of personhood. The heart is also the place from which people deny God (Psalm 14.1) and devise evil plans (Genesis 6:5). It is the heart that God changes from stone to flesh (Ezekiel 36.26). Searle notes some of the problems in identifying heart and imagination. The biblical concept of heart is a comprehensive one

[7] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart* p. 30. Garrett Green, *Imagining God,* pp. 109–110. Alison Searle, *"The Eyes of Your Heart": Literary and Theological Trajectories of Imagining Biblically* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), pp. 32, 34.
[8] Alfred Marshall, R.S.V., Interlinear Greek-English New Testament (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1958).
[9] *Holy Bible*, King James Version
[10] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart*, pp. 30–31. Garrett Green, *Imagining God,* pp. 109–110. Searle, *The Eyes of Your Heart,* pp. 34–36.

encompassing the personality as a whole and cannot simply be identified with the modern concept of imagination.[11] By drawing on the biblical concept of heart, imagination can be redefined as a broad concept but heart and imagination overlap rather than being equivalent.

8.3.1 Imaginative language in the Bible

The biblical warrant for using the imagination does not rely on etymology alone, throughout the Bible there are models of imagination in practice in parables, metaphors and imagery. The wisdom literature is rich in startling figurative language; a lazy person is likened to vinegar on the teeth (Proverbs 10:26) and death is the snapping of the silver cord (Ecclesiastes 12:6). This continues in the prophetic books where judgement is a hungry lion (Jeremiah 4:7) and the judged nation is left as a shack in a cucumber field (Isaiah 1:8). Walter Brueggemann describes the prophets as using intense imagery that opens up ‘emotive possibilities’, their language is concrete and resonates with the realities of life as experienced by their hearers.[12] Jesus embraces imaginative language in all its forms; he declares the pharisees are ‘straining at gnats and swallowing camels’ (Matthew 23:24); the Kingdom of God is like a treasure, a pearl and a net (Matthew 13:44–50) and the end comes like a thief in the night (Matthew 24:43). Jesus used parables to teach about God and drew on the imagination of hearers using images of hiring workers, rebellious sons and weddings (Matthew 20:1–6; 25:1–4; Luke 15:11–32). For Paul Ricoeur, Jesus’ teaching pivots around the imaginative form of parables, which he labels ‘limit expressions’. The parables break out of the limits of the narrative and into experience and encounter.[13]

Diane Apostolos-Cappadona notes how the Bible uses imaginative constructions to communicate theological understanding. Images can shock, transform, please and educate; they can make hearers both see and feel.[14] God is imaged as an eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11–12) and a mother (Hosea 11:3-4), while the

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[11] Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart*, p. 19. Searle, *The Eyes of your Heart*, pp. 34–39. Bruce, *Igniting the Heart*, pp. 31–2. Garrett Green, *Imagining God,* pp. 109–110.
[12] Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipatory Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), p. 25.
[13] Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion Narrative and Imagination*, ed. by Mark I. Wallace, trans. by David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 60–61, 164–65.
[14] Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, ‘Seeing Religious Conversion Through the Arts’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. by Lewis R. Rambo, and Charles E. Farhadian, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 327-342 (pp. 327, 329 331).

Devil is like a roaring lion (I Peter 5:8) and a dragon (Revelation 12:9). The prophets also engage in imaginative dramatic acts, they perform words from God: Isaiah walked naked (Isaiah 20:3), Jeremiah bought a plot of land (Jeremiah 32:6–15) and Ezekiel enacted a mini-siege (Ezekiel 4:1–3). Each of these forms of imaginative communication is earthed in the concrete and particular; imagination retains its anchor to the world even if it has a length of chain to give it freedom.

8.4 Imagination: historical perspectives

Biblical language and etymology may license the use of the imagination to a degree, but the verdict of the Christian tradition is also important in giving preachers confidence in using the imagination. Once again there are no simple answers, the voice of tradition is ambivalent; attitudes to imagination changed over time. Most views are present at any point in history but certain trends can be detected in different historical periods. History presents a series of hurdles concerning imagination: the second commandment, a fear of dependency, misuse, distraction, unreliability, an inability to communicate truth, and unreality. In this section I include attitudes to images as well as linguistic expressions of imagination as attitudes to images often reflect an underlying view on imagination, and revelatory preaching draws on art as well as text.

The first hurdle is the Bible's injunction to make no graven image (Exodus 20:4) but the use of imagination to create tangible images does not seem to apply to word-images. One may not draw God's hands but one may freely speak of them imaginatively, 'I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands,' says God (Isaiah 49:16). This ban does not seem to be total as God instructs craftsmen to make cherubim for the temple (Exodus 25:18–20) and it does not seem to have been universally enforced as images of biblical scenes have been found in synagogues in Huqoq and Dura-Europos, including a painted hand of God.[15]

Figurative language that creates mental images is embraced within the Old Testament while visual images are not. A group of Jewish scholars from Tel Aviv university (Elinor Amit, Daniel Algom, Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman) explain this phenomenon in terms of distance. They stress the transcendence of God, 'In

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[15] Bible Archaeology Society, *Explore The Huqoq Mosaics* (2019) <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/ scholars-study/more-on-the-mosaics/> [accessed 10 February 2021]. Dura Europos Synagogue paintings <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hand_of_God_(art)#/media/File:Moses_and_burning_bush.jpeg> [accessed 10 February 2021].

monotheistic religions, God is transcendental. God is immeasurably remote and secluded from humans and their pursuits.' The Tel Aviv team perceive visual images as transgressing this remoteness. Their research deems art to be a low-level construal that is concrete, contextualized and conveys closeness, whereas words are high-level construals that are cognitive and convey information in a more abstract way, more appropriate for talking about God. The contrast between word and picture is underscored. Even when words do spark the imagination the contrast with images is still emphasized, 'mental simulation based on words (sequentially processed symbols that stand for referents) differs from that based on pictures.'[16] Imagination expressed pictorially is not only forbidden in this view; it is downgraded.

Interesting though this research is, for Christians the view of a remote transcendent God is tempered by the incarnation and by God's engagement with humanity throughout the Bible. God's transcendence and immanence are held in tension. Eslinger perceives the contrast between image and text to be overstated, for image and language interact, particularly in metaphoric mode.[17] Not all language works in structured, sequential ways as the Tel Aviv team suggest, figurative language works associatively rather than sequentially. Like images, language can be concrete and contextual.

8.4.1 The Early Church and Middle Ages

The witness of the Early Church Fathers is indecisive. Imaginative language was integral to preachers such as John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople from 398–404CE, who earned his title 'golden mouth' on the basis of his eloquence, imaginative preaching and 'vivid imagery'.[18] William Dyrness notes how sight was highly valued in the early years of Christianity and external objects became the means of stimulating the internal vision of spiritual things. Augustine thought that things could become signs that lead people to God. Pope Gregory thought images helped people understand God; they were the visual scriptures for the illiterate.[19] Although no religious artefacts are found prior to 200CE, imagination expressed

[16] Elinor Amit and others, '"Thou shalt Not Make Unto Thee Any Graven Image": The Distance Dependence of Representation', in *The Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation,* ed. by Keith D. Markman, William Martin Klein and Julie A. Suhr, (New York: Psychology Press, 2009), pp. 53–68 (pp. 53–4, 56).
[17] Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination*, p. 85.
[18] Michael Green, 'John Chrysostom the Preacher', in *Knowing and Doing*, (2008), 1, 12–16 <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/463> [accessed 10 February 2021] (p. 14).
[19] William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 19, 21.

visually in art came to play an increasing role in Christian faith. Despite this, suspicion of visually expressed imagination, often based on the second commandment, led to controversies concerning icons. This was an issue not settled until the ninth century, largely through an appeal to the incarnation. Jesus was the image of the invisible God and depicting his 'likeness' was an affirmation of the incarnation.

David Brown sees the growing use of images over the centuries as a reflection of a more confident church that could transform suspicion of imagery into an aid to faith.[20] Miles traces that development of imagination through the Middle Ages as expressed in preaching, drama and devotional exercises. Worship engaged the imagination, and the visual nature of decorated churches nurtured the imagination of the congregation. There was a belief that images could inspire devotion, focus attention, stimulate thinking, affect the will and direct people's desires and longings.[21] Theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, advocated the use of images in thinking. Aquinas defends imagination, 'It is impossible to understand without the imagination. Therefore in divine science we must resort to images.'[22] The visual was not a poor cousin of the verbal. Visual imagination was engaged in reading and listening, in personal devotion, in books of hours and spiritual exercises. There were still hurdles to be overcome, in particular a fear of dependence on external visual images rather than internal and spiritual ones, but this existed side by side with an encouragement of the imagination.

8.4.2 The Reformation and Counter Reformation

The hurdles of distraction, shallowness, misuse and idolatry formed part, but not the whole, of the Reformation response to imagination. Dyrness describes the Reformation as marked by a Protestant suspicion of the imagination, particularly as expressed in artwork. The Puritan John Sibbes adjudged the imagination to be 'shallow', stirring the affections and presenting the shadowy things of this world in contrast to the realities of religion. Luther, like his Medieval forebears, believed God could speak through all creation and was open to the use of images in worship.

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[20] David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, p. 344.
[21] Miles, *Image as Insight*, pp. 65–69, 98, 144.
[22] Thomas Aquinas, *Super Boethium De Trinitate*, trans. by Arnaud Mauer (Toronto: n.pub., 1953) <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/BoethiusDeTr.htm> [accessed 10 February 2021], Question. 6. Article 2.

Luther's Bible was illustrated, and woodcuts proliferated in Germany.[23] Luther wrote in defence of images providing they were not venerated. Rosemarie Bergmann observes that he objected to the abuse of images rather than images themselves. He condemned images that communicated a theology that he deemed as false, such as Mary as mediator or images given to the church in hope of gaining favour with God.[24] Calvin and Zwingli had more radical views, both excluded images from worship on the grounds of idolatry and distraction. Zwingli declared that images could not teach but allowed nature patterns such as trees and flowers inside church. Outside the church context only images that did not incite honour were acceptable.[25] Calvin esteemed painting and sculpture as gifts from God and they could be used 'purely and lawfully' but not in churches, it was doctrine that communicated truth about God, not images.[26]

Bergmann describes the Reformation attitude to images as far from simple. There was no straightforward cause and effect in terms of Protestant theology and a reduction in artistic expression. There was a general decline in artistic expression in the sixteenth century in German speaking countries. This happened in both Catholic and Protestant areas and the thirty years war and Protestant theology both contributed to the decline.[27]

Generally, visual imagination tended to give way to auditory imagination as preaching came to the fore in Protestant churches. The ear was promoted above the eye but with no explanation why the ear should be immune from the distortion of sin. There were waves of Protestant iconoclasm, but Dyrness sees this as an acknowledgement of the power of images not a belittling of imagination. Surprisingly, he puts forward a positive interpretation of Protestant iconoclastic tendencies, describing them as a popular impulse against the way images had been used both socially and religiously. He describes the destruction as a way of expressing a new start and a boost to a different type of creativity as seen in the

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[23] Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, pp. 7–8, 53–54.

[24] Rosemarie Bergmann, 'A "Tröstlich Pictura": Luther's Attitude in the Question of Images', *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme,* 5 (1981), 15–25 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43444303?seq=1> [accessed 10 February 2021] (p. 18).

[25] Zwingli**,** Ulrich, *Huldrych Zwingli Writings*, trans. by H. Wayne Pipkin, 500th anniversary edn, *Pittsburgh Theological Monographs 12–13,* 2 vols (Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1984), II, pp. 68–71.

[26] Jean Calvin, *The Institutes of The Christian Religion*, trans. by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2002) <http://www.ntslibrary.com/PDF%20Books/Calvin%20Institutes%20of%20Christian%20Religion.pdf> [accessed 10 February 2021], BOOK 1, pp. 68–78. ebook

[27] Bergmann, 'A "Tröstlich Pictura", pp.15–16.

Dutch Golden Age of painting that flourished in Calvinist Holland and the poetry of Anne Bradstreet in Puritan America.[28]

Although there was a distrust of imagination among some Puritans, it was the tradition that produced John Milton, John Bunyan and Jonathan Edwards. Paul Baumgartner observes that Puritan preachers used figurative language which reflected the language of the Bible; Puritans were not necessarily reluctant users of metaphor.[29] Despite this, some Puritans felt the need to defend imaginative language. Bunyan's apology at the beginning of his *Pilgrim's Progress* is an attempt to forestall criticism such as a lack of 'solidity' and counteract an antipathy towards figurative language expressed as 'metaphors make us blind'. Bunyan simply points to the Bible which is full of figurative language.[30] Edwards was more positive concerning the use of imagination, seeing imagination as enabling people to think of spiritual realities.[31]

Catholicism responded to the Protestant challenge by an increasing emphasis on preaching, creating more of a balance between text and image. Unlike the Protestant church, the Catholic Council of Trent (1563) reaffirmed the value of images in Catholic worship.[32] In Catholic countries Baroque religious art expressed Catholic thinking, though it developed across the religious divide. It was a style full of drama and intense feeling. The most well-known expression of this type of imagination is Bernini's *Ecstasy of St Theresa*.[33]

8.4.3 The Enlightenment and the eighteenth century

The Enlightenment highlighted different hurdles to the use of the imagination, its dependability as a source of knowledge came into question along with its non-rational status. During the Enlightenment rationality was privileged over other forms of knowledge. René Descartes' pessimism concerning imagination is typical of many Enlightenment thinkers. For Descartes, imagination was not something he could

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[28] Dyrness, *Reformed Theology,* pp. 69, 301–303.
[29] Paul R. Baumgartner, 'Jonathan Edwards: The Theory Behind His Use of Figurative Language', *PMLA,* 78 (1963), 321-25 (p. 321).
[30] John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2005), p. 8.
[31] Jonathan Edwards, 'Experiencing God', in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. by Gesa E. Thiessen (London: SCM, 2004), pp. 172–74.
[32] The Council of Trent, *Second Decree on the Invocation, the Veneration, and the Relics, of Saints, and on Sacred Images* (1563)' <http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch25.htm> [accessed 10 February 2021].
[33] Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of St Teresa,* 1645–52, marble, 3.5m, Cornaro Chapel, Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Ecstasy-of-Saint-Teresa> [accessed 10 February 2021].

depend on as a source of secure knowledge, and imagination did not have a role in reasoning.[34] David Hume was more sympathetic, acknowledging a role for the imagination in thinking, it could unite and compose ideas but could not by itself reach belief, and a 'heated imagination' was detrimental to judgement and understanding.[35]

Kant believed that imagination had a role in thinking, in synthesizing knowledge, bringing ideas and sense experience together. He names imagination as one of the three original sources alongside sense and apperception.[36] For Kant, the authentic form of religion was the pure philosophical variety. A less authentic version was popular religion. The beliefs and practices of ordinary religion use images that flow from the imagination rather than pure reason. Kant saw ordinary religion as *Vorstellung*, a word used for imagination and figurative language. He thought people needed sense experience to lead them to pure reason and many people needed the 'imaginative truth' of ordinary religion.[37]

8.4.4 The Romantic Movement and the nineteenth century

The positivist view of science and sceptical views in philosophy presented hurdles to the use of imagination in the nineteenth century; this was in contrast to the Romantic Movement that venerated the imagination. The Romantic Movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries viewed imagination as humanity's foremost faculty; it is the point of contact, in terms of creativity, between the human and divine.[38] David Brown notes the negative aspect of this high view of imagination, it was vaunted to the extent that it seemed to be appropriating God's creative role.[39] Generally, the Romantic Movement stressed the image-making role of imagination, but Coleridge explored its other roles; he spoke of primary imagination as the human ability to organize sensations and perceptions, which echoes God's work of bringing order out of chaos. For humanity, this aspect of imagination is unconscious. Coleridge describes secondary imagination as a unifying, shaping and enlivening

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[34] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from Objections and Replies,* trans. by Michael Moriaty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) <https://archive.org/details/meditationsonfir0000desc> [accessed 22 February 2021], pp. 20–22.
[35] David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Jonathan Bennet (2008), <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hume1748.pdf> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 7, 10, 22–23, 28, 60.
[36] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans and ed. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 225, 237–41.
[37] Garrett Green, *Imagining God,* pp. 14–15.
[38] Garrett Green, *Imagining God,* p. 18.
[39] David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 349.

power in a conscious, voluntary form. It is the capacity to reimagine the world, to re-shape and unify. This reshaping is determined by the interactions of the subjective and objective poles of perception.[40]

Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* is an example of philosophical scepticism. He dismissed religion as little more than wish fulfilment of the wrong type of desires that long for things beyond the natural. God is conjured by the imagination.[41] The rise of positivist views of science also excluded imagination for many, despite George MacDonald's defence of imagination in science. MacDonald maintained that imagination is aroused and nourished by facts and has a key role in the design of experiments, questions and hypothesizes.[42] If imagination was not well defended in theology and philosophy, it was alive and well in other aspects of nineteenth century religious life. Imagination was expressed in hymnody, novel, poetry, fairy story, preaching and religious art. George MacDonald, Charles Kingsley, Christina Rossetti, and Elizabeth Barret Browning are just a few writers and poets who engaged with faith and used imaginative forms. Although Charles Haddon Spurgeon decried imagination from the pulpit, calling it building on sand, many Victorian preachers saw its potential.[43]

8.4.5 The Twentieth and twenty-first centuries

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries presented imagination with a new hurdle, an identification with religion. Garrett Green sees religion as undermined by the identification of religion with imagination, which was perceived as subjective and unreliable. Religious statements were not regarded as truth as they were based on language that was figurative and deemed less capable of conveying truth than literal language that delivered facts.[44] This view tends not to accept that imaginative texts and images communicate truth in different ways, an understanding of imagination

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[40] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literia with his Aesthetical Essays,* ed. by J. Shawcross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907) <https://archive.org/details/biographialitera19071cole/page/n5/mode/2up> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. lxvii, lxxv, 202. Internet Archive ebook.

[41] Ludwig Feuerbach, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion,* trans. by Ralph Mannheim (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) <https://rowlandpasaribu.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/ludwig-feuerbach-lectures-on-the-essence-of-religion.pdf> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 15–16, 19, 21, 23.

[42] George MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination and on Shakespeare* (London: Sampson Low Marston, 1895) <https://archive.org/details/dishofortschiefl00macduoft/page/44/mode/2up> [accessed February 2021, pp. 1–2, 11–13.

[43] Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Soul–Winner*, rev. edn (Abbotsford, WI: Aneko Press, 2016), p. 2.

[44] Garrett Green, *Imagining God,* pp. 25–26.

explored by Tolkien in his paper *On Fairy Stories.* Tolkien defended imagination (which he termed fantasy) as enabling people to inhabit another world.[45] Other worlds offered people opportunities to think through different possibilities via imaginative engagement. This was expressed in Tolkien's own works and those of C. S. Lewis. There were also alternative voices in science and philosophy; Einstein valued imagination and visualization was part of his scientific approach. 'I am enough of the artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.'[46] Today, there is a wider acceptance of imagination in science, neither Michael Polanyi or Nelson Goodman drew a sharp line between science and the arts, imagination has a role to play in both.[47]

Imagination has had a chequered career, from being regarded as evil to being perceived as a reflection of the divine. Walter Brueggemann talks of imagination enjoying a 'comeback' as a way of knowing. John Piper, from the Reformed tradition, regards using imagination as a Christian duty and he considers speaking, singing or painting about truth in a boring manner as 'probably a sin'.[48] Although some conservative Christian traditions have tended to be suspicious of imagination, the line can no longer be drawn neatly between conservatives and liberals in terms of their attitude towards imagination. Nevertheless, imagination is not endorsed without taking account of some of the warnings of history. Neither the almost God-like status of imagination of the Romantics nor the early reformers rejection are an appropriate stance for preachers today. Imagination is a God-given ability but it is fallen and in need of redemption, as is reason (Romans 12:2). Nevertheless, history bears witness to its potential in thinking, in devotion and in communicating truth.

8.5 Understandings of imagination

A revelatory approach to preaching depends on the imaginative ability of preachers but some will decry their lack of imagination, for it is perceived as something one

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[45] J. R. R. Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*, Andrew Lang Lecture 1939 <https://archive.org/details/on-fairy-stories/page/33/mode/2up?q=epilogue> [accessed 10 February 2021], epilogue.

[46] Albert Einstein, 'What Life Means to Einstein, *Saturday Evening Post*, 26 October 1929 <http://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/wp-content/uploads/satevepost/einstein.pdf> [accessed 10 February 2021], p. 117.

[47] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, pp. 243–44, 251, 263–64. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 194, 199–200, 284.

[48] Walter. Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, p. 32. John Piper, *Obey God with Your Creativity: The Christian Duty of Imagination* (2018) <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/obey-god-with-your-creativity> [accessed 10 February 2021].

either has or is lacking. Such a position ignores the fact that imagination is an ability we encounter every day in music and drama, in technology and science. Despite this, there is no common consensus concerning what imagination is or its function. Amy Kind and Peter Kung stress that imagination is an everyday capability people use to enable them to navigate the world. In order to live we need more than sight; we need to anticipate what might happen and envisage different scenarios. We use imagination daily as we anticipate what other people might be thinking or feeling.[49] Imagination gives thoughts form in language, gesture and art. Imagination shapes us and the environment in which we dwell; in turn imagination is itself shaped by its use and the intellectual environment.

One definition of imagination is the ability to produce images in the mind, which has been considered a basic element since Aristotle.[50] W. Macneile Dixon describes the mind as a ‘picture gallery’ rather than a ‘debating hall’.[51] Eslinger notes that some phenomenologists denied this image-making facility, but recently the concept of mental imagery has re-emerged; people appear to create images in some form in their minds.[52] Garrett Green points out that visual imagination is not inner sight, it is *like* inner sight. The images people form are analogical, showing what God is like, not what God is. The issue is not whether we form images but whether the images formed are appropriate; do the images reflect the gospel as rendered in Scripture?

Another aspect of imagination is its interpretive function which can disclose a new reality. This can be seen in the Gospels in the Kingdom of God parables. When people interpret, imagination uses images drawn from reality to aid understanding of things that are not part of direct experience.[53] Walter Brueggemann shares this view, seeing imagination as the capacity to create visions of reality that are not about the world as it is but what it could be.[54] This visionary understanding draws on the image-making power of imagination and its ability to call to mind other senses.

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[49] Amy Kind and Peter Kung, ‘Introduction’, in *Knowledge Through Imagination*, ed. by Amy Kind and Peter Kung (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 1–37 (pp. 17–19).
[50] Aristotle, *On the Soul,* trans. by J. A. Smith (350 BCE) <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.3.iii.html> [accessed 10 February 2021], PART 3.III
[51] W. Macneile Dixon, *The Human Situation: The Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Glasgow, 1935–1937* (London: Edward Arnold, 1938), <https://archive.org/details/b29814637/page/n5/mode/2up> [accessed 10 February 2021], p. 65. Internet Archive ebook.
[52] Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination*, p. 50.
[53] Garrett Green, *Imagining God,* pp. 66, 93–94.
[54] Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination,* p. 25.

A third aspect of imagination is its ability to make the absent present. With imagination, we can make present temporal absence; we can travel to the past and project the future. With imagination we can make things that are spatially absent, present: we can travel to places we have never been. With imagination we can make the visually absent present; we can envisage things too small or too large for us to see. God is one such instance and sub-atomic particles another. We can envisage a soul and other aspects of life deemed real but intangible. Hypotheses and imaginings about future states of affairs are a way of making them present. Imagination plays a mediating role for things we cannot speak of directly.[55]

David Brown describes imagination as the faculty that can pull us beyond where we are, building on what we already understand. He calls this 'imaginative advance' and he sees this as particularly true of artists. This function of imagination enables people to time travel, enabling them to engage with values that may challenge their own.[56] Imaginative preaching can help shape both the individual and communal imagination of the congregation as people are faced with the different culture and values of the Bible.

8.5.1. Sacramental imagination

Sacramental imagination is a way of understanding another aspect of imagining. It is the type of imagination exercised when bread and wine are taken as the body and blood of Jesus, and the waters of baptism as rising to new life. To others they may be just bread, wine and water. A number of scholars reflect this view of sacramental imagination. David Wilkinson sees the biblical emphasis on the body and matter as 'central to sacramental theology'.[57] Sacramental imagination for Mary Catherine Hilkert is the ability to see the world as the place of God's presence, his grace, without denying either the reality of evil or the experience of absence.[58] It is a way of interpreting reality. In relationship to preaching, Bruce describes the sacramental as the 'more' that is present in ordinary experiences of life, revealing a deeper spirituality through the materiality of language.[59] This is a key function of the imagination in revelatory preaching that often locates insights in ordinary material

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[55] Garret Green, *Imagining God*, pp. 62–65.
[56] David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, p. 28.
[57] David A. Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), p. 149.
[58] Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1998), pp. 36–37, 47, 190.
[59] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart,* pp. 85–86.

existence. Hans Boersma describes the mind-set of Pre-Modern preachers and hearers as sacramental. For Pre-Modern and Medieval people, the earthly created realities participated in heavenly ones. Despite this chorus of endorsement, there is a danger that a broad view of the sacramental nature of life could be perceived as weakening the recognized sacraments. Boersma uses the terms 'weak' and 'strong' to distinguish between a general sacramental presence and the presence encountered in the named sacraments.[60]

8.6 Taxonomies of imagination: Eslinger, Wheelwright and Bruce

There remains for preachers a hurdle concerning imagination's functions. Too narrow a view could preclude its use. Kate Bruce, Richard Eslinger and Philip Wheelwright categorize imagination in different ways; their taxonomies overlap but are not identical. Eslinger and Bruce classify imagination according to its various aspects, whereas Wheelwright classifies imagination according to stages.

Drawing on Mary Warnock and David Bryant's work, Eslinger's first category, 'seeing as' is a perceptual model of imagination using mental images. This is what enables people to imaginatively focus on an aspect of what is seen and pay attention to neglected features. It enables people to see from different perspectives. A lumberjack perceives a tree differently to a bird watcher; it would be a radical change of perspective for a lumberjack to perceive a tree in the way that a birdwatcher does. This is more than a change in aspect, an affective element is involved.

Eslinger's second category, 'imagining that', builds on the work of Edward Casey. 'Imagining that' is intentional and can imagine a state of affairs with all its 'nexus of relations' and complexity. It can be sensory but not all 'imagining that' engages the senses. We can imagine Big Ben striking thirteen or we can imagine a law being changed, the latter being low in sensory engagement. In Isaiah 52:1–12, the prophet imagines the release from captivity and the return to Israel.

Imagining how' is Eslinger's third category. 'Imagining how' can have a state of affairs as its framework but it involves what it would be like if that state of affairs were to happen, it involves participation and has a more empathetic and self-reflective element. A person can imagine the law going through parliament, the debates and think of ways of countering objections. They can imagine the outcome and the difference it would make. Preachers may imagine how the congregation may

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[60] Hans Boersma, *Sacramental Preaching: Sermons on the Hidden Presence of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), pp. xx.

receive the Sunday sermon. This is more than a mental rehearsal; it is the ability to imaginatively relocate into different settings from which new insights may be learned.[61] Revelatory preaching draws on these aspects; it engages the senses and uses imagination to paint a world or a vision that invites people in to experience new insights.

Philip Wheelwright developed his taxonomy for poetics, but it could equally apply to homiletics. Confrontative imagination is the initiating stage, there is immediacy about this stage and imagination has a 'radical particularity' and an 'intensifying function', poetic language intensifies what it focuses on. The language is direct and exhibits 'experiential precision'. The process of looking for the particular and unique in experience is an imaginative one. The next stage is imaginative distancing, this is a drawing back in order to gain a 'right distance' which is needed to gain new perspectives. Composite imagination brings together the results of the first two stages in some form of unifying act. The unifying act may be by blending, by association or by 'creative synthesis' resulting in something new. Finally, archetypal imagining gives depth by evoking the universal via the particular. 'Universals that enter into poetry are concrete and radically implicit universals.'[62] Although presented as sequential, these stages interact and overlap. Wheelwright's first stage, where he uses the language of precision, is the cause of some debate as not all precision is of the analytic type. Aristotle talked of each class of things having precision according to its nature.[63] Poetic and experiential precision is often expressed in unusual combinations. Gerard Manley Hopkin's 'mind has mountains; cliffs of fall' is a 'precise' description of depression at an intuitive, experiential level.[64] Revelatory preaching uses similar phases of particular focus and distancing, of specific and universal, of experiential precision.

Bruce's categories of imagination encompass many of the definitions of what imagination is and the various roles it plays under four functions: sensory, intuitive, affective and intellectual. Although these functions are presented separately, in practice they overlap.

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[61] Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination*, pp. 57–62.

[62] Philip Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain: A Study in the Language of Symbolism,* rev edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968) <https://archive.org/details/burningfountain00phil> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 78–100. Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination*, pp. 62–64.

[63] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, trans. by W. D. Ross (350 BCE) <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.1.i.html> [accessed 10 February 2021] BOOK I, para. 3.

[64] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'No Worst, There Is None', in *The Anthology of Popular Verse*, ed. by Christopher Hurford (Bristol: Parragon, 1995), p. 377, l.9.

8.6.1 The sensory function

The sensory function of imagination is involved in the way people perceive the world. This function of the imagination enables people to form mental images from sensory data. Imagination categorizes information and aids people in perceiving continuity in life. Imagination works in both reproductive and productive mode. In reproductive mode imagination reproduces from its sensory bank what we cannot directly perceive. Seeing is partial and perspectival; reproductive imagination fills the gaps and enables people to see holistically. Imagination in its productive mode takes material garnered from the senses and experiments with different combinations to explore possibilities. The imagination in this mode helps people to 'walk the landscape' of the biblical world in an Ignatian fashion, registering the impact on the different senses.[65]

In revelatory preaching this function comes into play when the text is unfolded and the 'living text' is created, returning the text to sensed experience. This extract from a sermon preached by Bruce at Durham Cathedral picks up sense cues from the text and develops them.

> First let's zoom in on the disciples after the storm has been stilled. […] There they are, hair plastered down by lake water, crouching in a half-submerged boat, its hull caressed by gentle wavelets. For all the calm around them, in their hearts and minds they are buffeted by questions, fear, awe, wonder. Perhaps a tempest of recrimination blasts at them? [66]

Keying into the sensory nature of the text needs a close form of seeing and slow reading that goes beyond the surface understanding of a sentence. It involves asking what the situations in the text would feel like in sensory terms. Using imagination in this way takes people into a scene.[67] This aspect of the imagination concretises texts and stops unearthed abstractions that Blayne Banting names as the nemesis of imagination, which is both concrete and particular.[68] It is the sensory function that enables preachers to present characters and scenes in a way that people can relate to, creating the potential for identification and recognition. It is used in the final stage of The sensory function allows people to place themselves in a situation. Wiersbe notes this in the contrasting speeches of Hushai and Ahithophel (II Samuel 17:5-14).

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[65] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart*, pp. 3–5.
[66] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart*, p. 184.
[67] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart*, pp. 5–7, 146–47.
[68] Blayne A. Banting, *With Wit and Wonder: The Preacher's Use of Humour and Imagination* (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2013), p. 99.

Ahithophel lays before Absalom a workable strategic plan but it is presented mundanely. Hushai, in contrast, presents an inferior plan using imaginative language which enabled Absalom to imagine winning. Although Ahithophel's plan was superior, it was Hushai's plan that was accepted. [69]

8.6.2 The intuitive function

This function of the imagination Bruce describes as the ability to make connections and see patterns beyond the obvious. These patterns usually take time to form, though occasionally they come in a moment of insight after a period of gestation. This is the function of imagination that forms metaphors and other types of figurative language. This form of imagination has a playful side, it is seeing one thing as another. Making connections in this way can challenge the way people see themselves, others and the world. It enables people to imagine other possibilities and change the way they look on the world, not as a distant observer, but with commitment; it is a way to frame life. This aspect of imagination brings together the world of the text and the congregation enabling insights to form that can inspire new ways of living.[70]

Michael Austin labels intuition imagination's 'paintbrush'. In this mode imagination can go from A to E without having to go through the intermediary steps of BCD.[71] Imagination in this mode can synthesise and innovate, bringing together ideas that are not obvious partners, breaking new ground. It may bring surprise and recognition as it may be a variation rather than completely new.[72] It is this function that enable preachers to paint scenes that bring things together that create insights. Brown Taylor demonstrates this when she brings together the imperfections of the contemporary Church and the ruined churches of Georgia (Eurasia).

> All that is left are the walls, the graceful arches, and here and there the traces of an old fresco that has somehow survived the years — half a face, with one wide eye looking right at you — one raised arm, the fingers curled in that distinct constellation: it is Christ the Lord, still giving his blessing to a ruined church.[73]

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[69] Wiersbe, *Preaching & Teaching with Imagination*, pp. 15–18.
[70] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart*, pp. 8–11.
[71] Michael Austin*, Explorations in Art,* p. 3.
[72] Banting, *With Wit and Wonder*, pp. 98–99.
[73] Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, p. 137.

The intuitive function, like the sensory imagination, contributes to new ways of understanding the world and construing it in a way that is different to the assumed view of life. This, for Walter Brueggemann, is 'prophetic imagination' that refuses to conform to the dominant view, a theme that runs throughout Brueggemann's thinking. Imagination re-describes life and construes an alternative understanding of the world. It is living by an 'alternative script' that he describes as subversive. For Brueggemann the poet is engaged in a form of 'guerrilla warfare'. He acknowledges that although seeing new realities changes everything, in one sense nothing changes. Prophetic preaching that advocates this counter-narrative will sound like nonsense to many, but such is the foolishness of the gospel (I Corinthians 1:18–25).[74] It is often the playwrights, the writers and the poets who are silenced in dictatorships, the storytellers of a culture, those who can articulate a different vision of life and are therefore dangerous. Revelatory preaching uses this function of the imagination in pattern recognition that develops insights.

8.6.3 The affective function

Bruce's third category is the affective function. People experience this aspect of imagination in both sympathy and empathy. Sympathy is emotionally standing with someone; empathy is imaginatively attempting both to view and experience the world from their perspective; it is an imaginative view from within. Affective imagination is used when people identify with characters. Such engagement can generate compassion and understanding, with the potential to reveal new insights and transform attitudes. It can make the absent present and the distant near. The affective function comes into play in sermon preparation, in imagining oneself into a situation. Ignatian techniques can be used to imaginatively enter a text and the biblical world. The affective imagination also helps to enter the situation of the congregation, asking the question, 'How will this be heard?' [75] This function of imagination is involved as people read Scripture, placing themselves alongside the characters, seeking God's will and endeavouring to put it into practice. Empathetic imagination is involved in

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[74] Walter Brueggemann, *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 8, 15–16. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination,* 2nd edn (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 73. Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination,* pp. 2, 6. Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, pp. 26, 29–32, 44.

[75] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart,* pp. 13–14.

loving one's neighbour, and imaginative preaching can help hearers respond with compassion towards others.[76]

Molly Andrews, who explores the everyday use of imagination, notes how we use it daily as we try to understand people we perceive as different from ourselves.[77] This aspect of imagination is powerful and comes with attendant dangers and limitations. Emotion and reason need to be balanced, and human beings are limited in the degree to which they can enter another's situation.[78] There are some characters preachers would not want their congregation to empathize with and some narratives that are unsuitable for this use of the imagination. The process of entering into a situation empathetically should not emotionally overwhelm people, taking away their ability to decide their response or reflect at depth. The empathetic and sympathetic aspects of affective imagination can help many people enter the world of the Bible and emotionally cross barriers of time and culture, gender and class. Nevertheless, there are no guarantees of understanding or changed attitudes.

Banting calls this aspect of imagination 'ethical' it is the type of imagination that enables people to envision a world where faithful and compassionate lives are lived in community by empathizing with the needs of others.[79] This aspect of imagination shows how the biblical words *leb* and *kardia* combine an affective and volitional role, emotion touches the will. This is an aspect of imagination that Miles puts forward, she notes that the Early Church acknowledged the emotional power of images due to their power to 'concentrate the will'.[80] Walter Brueggemann recognizes the volitional role of imagination that is needed to produce counter-obedience.[81] Affective and cognitive responses are popularly deemed to be opposites, but it is rarely an 'either or' choice, for emotion can aid cognition, marking its significance. The affective is not automatically effective, the way it is used is crucial, neither does the affective imagination guarantee truth. The revelatory approach engages the emotions and empathic imagination to present characters and situations in a way that congregants can engage with, but this aspect of imagination is not exercised on its own.

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[76] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart*, pp. 45–46.
[77] Molly Andrews, *Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life*: *Explorations in Narrative Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 11.
[78] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart*, pp. 14–15.
[79] Banting, *With Wit and Wonder*, p. 101.
[80] Miles, *Image as Insight*, p. 45.
[81] Walter Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, p. 43.

8.6.4 The intellectual function

Imagination's intellectual function brings together reason and imagination; it allows 'if this … then that' thinking to happen. This hypothesizing skill is an imaginative one. Bruce relates this function to Thomas Kuhn's work on paradigm shifts, which occur when there is dissonance, an anomaly within a person's interpretive framework through which they understand the world. In Christianity, the major shift would be conversion where one view of reality is relinquished in favour of another. Some sermons rely heavily on imagination's intellectual function, employing reason, argument and the imaginative 'if this…then that' format, '*If* Christ rose *then*…'. This construal allows people to follow an argument or situation without being committed to its truth, which leaves the sermon invitational rather than coercive.[82]

Peter Berger calls paradigm shifting 'switching worlds'.[83] However, people cannot switch unless an alternative is made available and that alternative needs presenting with 'great artistry, care and boldness'.[84] This reflects Ricoeur's shattering and re-description of reality by metaphoric language.[85] The decision to reject one paradigm is accompanied by the decision to accept another. This switch is not arrived at in fragmentary or accumulative ways, it is a change in vision as a whole.[86] Conversion is not just new ideas imported into an old framework but a transformed imaginative framework. This 'alternative vision' function of the intellectual imagination can be for good or ill, we see it in the garden of Eden when the serpent tempts Eve; Eve is not just tempted to disobey, she is tempted to imagine herself, 'like God' (Genesis 3.4-5). Presenting an imaginative vision as part of a revelatory approach needs handling with great care. Such vision should challenge rather than create guilt and despair, be achievable with God, and be something the congregation can imagine themselves part of. Such visions should attract and be a world people want to live in, in order to remain invitational.

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[82] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart*, pp. 17– 19. Thomas S. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* 3rd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) <https://archive.org/details/structureofscien0003kuhn_k955/> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 52–65, 85–89. Internet Archive ebook.

[83] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) <https://archive.org/details/socialconstructi0000berg> [accessed 17 February 2021], pp. 144–45. Internet Archive ebook.

[84] Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home,* pp. 35, 59.

[85] Paul Ricoeur, 'Word, Polysemy, Metaphor: Creativity in Language', in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflections on Imagination*, ed. by Mario J. Valdes (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 67–85 (pp. 84–85).

[86] Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination*, pp. 99–102.

H. Richard Niebuhr recognized that our choices are never 'between reason and imagination but only between reasoning on the basis of adequate images and thinking with the aid of evil imaginations'.[87] Arthur Koestler's bisociative thought is relevant to the intellectual imagination as it connects two previously unconnected things forming a synthesis that leads to discovery, rather than moving from particular to theory or from theory to implication/application. In art this type of thinking often leads to aesthetic confrontation rather than synthesis [88] Artists sometimes put two things in proximity that do not blend, and the confrontation can lead to insights. The artist 'Banksy' puts unusual images together to provoke thinking: men pointing bananas instead of guns, an image of tropical paradise on a grey concrete wall.[89] Paul Scott Wilson describes this bringing together of two ideas, often with no obvious connection, as generating a spark of 'creative energy'. [90]

Imagination in intellectual mode is what is used to penetrate reality to the truths within it.[91] This function of the imagination speaks to the issue of how cognition works with narrative, as the central texts of Christianity are in narrative form and some, such as parables, are not appropriate for traditional rationalistic treatment. Leyland Ryken points out that Jesus chose to communicate through the imaginative form of parables and trusted imagination to express truth about God.[92] Robert Hughes and Robert Kysar reflect on the relationship of imagination and doctrine; what we now label 'doctrine' arose largely from biblical narratives, an expression of imagination. Doctrine can provide a framework to interpret life, this may be achieved by the preacher using a theological image to help people to make sense of experience. The forming of the framework is an imaginative exercise and it allows people to imagine their lives within such a framework. This type of doctrinal language is concrete and imaginative and rooted in narrative.[93] A revelatory approach keeps doctrine embodied in people and situations within a narrative.

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[87] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941) <https://archive.org/details/meaningofrevelat00nieb> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 79–80. Internet Archive ebook.

[88] Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) <https://archive.org/details/actofcreation00koes/mode/2up> [accessed 10 February 2021], p. 45. Internet Archive ebook.

[89] Banksy, *Pulp Fiction* and *Unwelcome Intervention*, <https://auralcrave.com/en/2019/06/19/banksy-the-best-paintings-and-the-meaning-of-his-art/> [accessed 10 February 2021]

[90] Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart,* pp. 32–3.

[91] Wiersbe, *Preaching & Teaching with Imagination*, p. 70.

[92] Leland Ryken, "With Many Such Parables": The Imagination as a Means of Grace." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 134 (1990), 387–398 <http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/OTeSources/00-introduction/text/articles/Ryken-Literature-Pt4-BS.htm> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 393, 395.

[93] Robert G. Hughes and Robert Kysar *Preaching Doctrine for the Twenty-First Century*

Walter Brueggemann sees the intellectual pattern-making function of the imagination exhibited in the prophets, whom he describes as people who 'connect the dots'.[94] This is intellectual imagination's paradigmatic mode, it enables people to recognize exemplars and significant patterns that organize information that otherwise would just be a puzzling mass of material.[95] Intellectual imagination's 'if…then…' construal is how people explore alternative scripts for life. Jerome Bruner describes this as working in the subjunctive mode.[96] Magdalena Balcerek Jacobson emphasizes that this type of supposing is not completely free, it is constrained by circumstances and leads to deliberation on consequences. It is treating something as true for a limited time and purpose. It is imagination in reasoning mode.[97]

David Brown envisages imagination having a role in developing trajectories of thinking from the Bible, he quotes the example of attitudes to women. To use David Brown's terminology, Jesus' attitude was the example that laid the axe to the root of hierarchy but it was interaction with society over time and a deeper engagement with the text that developed the trajectory.[98] Imagination in this mode is guided by the trajectory of the Bible and reason. It is used in developing a detailed 'slice of life' for displaying a narrative in a revelatory approach. Artistic imagination also has an intellectual aspect. Art can pose questions, confront viewers with truths and show aspects of life that people no longer see or hear as a result of familiarity. Manet's '*Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* puts nudity and respectability side by side raising issues of how female nakedness is perceived.[99] Imagination is a way of knowing; a form of understanding and a way people make sense of the world and experience. Art can unify imagination and understanding.[100]

Gary Selby, exploring Paul's use of extra-rational persuasion, demonstrates the way Paul integrates persuasive speech and imaginative speech to communicate, for faith is far more than intellectual assent. Paul's speech often has a 'visual' dimension and creates an imaginative experience. In I Thessalonians 4:13–18 Paul

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 5-13, 32-46, 63–69.

[94] Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination,* pp. 53, 68.

[95] Garrett Green, *Imagining God,* p. 53.

[96] Jerome S. Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, new edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 26.

[97] Magdalena Balcerek Jacobson, 'On the Epistemic Value of Imagining, Supposing and Conceiving', in *Knowledge Through Imagination*, ed. by Kind and Kung, pp. 41–60 (pp. 51–53).

[98] David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, pp. 15, 22, 25, 29.

[99] Edouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* , 1863, oil on canvas, 208 × 265 cm, Musée D'Orsay, Paris <https://www.wga.hu/html_m/m/manet/1/5dejeun1.html> [accessed 10 February 2021].

[100] Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art,* pp. 13, 40.

enumerates the signs before the end using the senses and this sits alongside Paul's rational arguments not in opposition but blended. The rational alone can be hard to remember, the poetic makes ideas both memorable and comprehensible. The hearer is presented with the arguments, then invited to enter into an idea dramatically. Paul presents a vision of the end that allows people to participate imaginatively as the culmination of a discursive process. Paul has presented his case, but the Christian view of reality flies in the face of the evidence; Paul knows people need to 'see' it. The two modes work together. [101]

Language that uses the imagination is no guarantee of truth, but neither is logic a guarantee of veracity. A system can be logically sound and internally consistent but wrong. Reason and imagination need to work together, Sallie McFague describes this relationship as images feeding concepts and concepts disciplining images, 'Images without concepts are blind; concepts without images are sterile.'[102] In whatever way the Fall is understood, reason is not exempt from its effects. Imagination needs to be renewed and transformed, no more and no less than the mind (Romans 12:2).

8.7 Imagination and Christian theology

For many preachers there remains a hurdle of doctrine. Is the use of the imagination sanctioned by Christian doctrine? The doctrine of the creator God is important for understanding the imagination, for God's imagination is displayed in creation (Psalm 19:1). In the Early Church God was often described as an artist; Ambrose hailed God as the supreme artist and humanity as his artwork.[103] For Basil, the world was a work of art given to humanity by God the artist whose creative reach is infinite.[104] Human imagination is evidenced in the Bible in creative forms such as music, craft and poetry. God fills Bezalel with his Spirit for creative purposes (Exodus 31:1–6). The biblical writers engage their imaginations, and this is reflected in the imaginative

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[101] Gary S. Selby, *Not with Wisdom of Words: Nonrational Persuasion in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2016), pp. 13, 19, 28–29, 31, 51–57.
[102] Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) <https://archive.org/details/metaphoricaltheo00mcfa> [accessed 17 February 2021], p. 26. Internet Archive ebook.
[103] Ambrose, *Fathers of the Church*: *Hexameron, Paradise and Cain and Abel,* trans. by John J. Savage (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1961) <https://archive.org/details/fathersofthechur027571mbp/page/n5/mode/2up> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 21, 23, 94, 259–60. Internet Archive ebook.
[104] Basil, *On the Hexameron, Homily 1* <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/32011.htm> [accessed 10 February 2021], section 2.

texts of different genres in the Bible. Coleridge maintained that God did not dictate to the authors of the Bible but rather enabled them to speak out of their own faithfulness and experience through the inspiration of the Spirit.[105]

8.7.1 Imagination and the image of God

The understanding of humanity made in the image of God that was considered in chapter three is also important in understanding the use of the imagination in preaching. Different views of the imago Dei were considered in chapter three, here I just touch on the imago Dei and imagination. God's imagination in creation is beyond anything humanity can conceive, yet human beings share the ability to imagine, even if it is a very pale reflection of the divine. Both Coleridge and Bruce see creativity as an aspect of the imago Dei.[106] Bruce names imagination as the enabling factor, the divine gift that enables humanity to exercise relationships with God and others and to exercise stewardship of the earth.[107] Banting concurs but stresses that creativity can be used for good or ill.[108] God accepts music in worship when life and worship cohere, but spurns worship when lives conflict with God's standards (Amos 5:23–24).

Imagination is involved in views of the image of God that locate the image in the exercise of 'dominion' (Genesis 1:28). Dominion can be exercised in leadership and care of God's world and the people in it. Bruce also includes reproduction under dominion, which goes beyond procreation to imaginative creativity.[109] Human creativity may not be ex nihilo, but people can bring about the 'new' from innovative synthesis and from rethinking the old in new ways.

8.7.2 Imagination, the locus of revelation?

Garrett Green sees the Barth-Brunner debate in 1934 as significant for understanding the relationship between imagination and revelation. Chapter seven discussed different forms of revelation, whereas the Barth-Brunner debate concerned what constitutes a point of contact for revelation. Emil Brunner believed there must be a point of contact between God and humanity (*anknüpfungspunkt),* but he was clear

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105 Edmondson, 'Coleridge and Preaching', 75–94 (p. 83).
106 Edmondson, 'Coleridge and Preaching', 75–94 (pp. 90–91). Bruce, *Igniting the Heart*, pp. 47– 48.
107 Katherine Sarah Bruce, 'The Vital Importance of the Imagination in the Contemporary Preaching Event' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Durham University, 2013) <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/9399/> [accessed 10 February 2021], pp. 126–27.
108 Banting, *With Wit and Wonder* p. 65.
109 Bruce, *Igniting the Heart,* pp. 47–8.

that knowledge of God only comes through revelation from God. The *anknüpfungspunkt* is a God-shaped aspect of humanity not effaced by sin, it is the ability of humanity to be addressed by God and includes all that humanity knows naturally of God, however incomplete and confused. In contrast, Karl Barth, in a bid to maintain God's sovereignty, maintained that revelation is not the activating of some pre-existing human possibility but the free grace of God. Barth did not deny that there was a point of contact, he believed this was something created by revelation, not pre-existing, it is the effect of grace.[110]

Brunner's argument results in a form of natural theology, Barth's results in unpredictable revelation and a doctrine that is theologically consistent but isolated from life. Green puts forward an alternative, he identifies the point of divine-human contact as imagination. He re-describes Barth's view of revelation as the conversion of the imagination, in line with Barth's view of transformation and conformation to the image of God in Christ. Imagination is the anthropological point of contact for the divine revelation. It is not the foundation for revelation, it is simply the place where it happens and the way it happens. Describing the point of divine-human contact in terms of imagination does not reduce revelation to a human ability and it maintains divine grace. Understood this way revelation is still an act of faith 'comparable in significant respects to other forms of human experience'. This does justice to Barth's emphasis on grace and incorporates Brunner's stress on a point of contact and stops revelation being isolated. Imagination is the point in human experience where revelation is encountered without implying any inherent natural connection with God. The content of revelation is unique, but revelation is a real event in the world and therefore relates in some way to other real events.[111]

8.8 Imagination and creative freedom

Preachers may be convinced that using the imagination is sanctioned by both Scripture and tradition, they may have a broad view of its functions and its roots in Christian doctrine, but there remains one last hurdle. How far can imagination go? Imagination is associated with creative freedom; theology has connotations of conformity. As Paul Scott Wilson reminds preachers, they do not have the luxury of separating the Bible and imagination, which means some accommodation has to be

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[110] Garret Green, *Imagining God*, pp. 31–33.
[111] Garret Green, *Imagining God*, pp. 34–40.

made for both to work together.[112] Coleridge described the relationship of the freedom of imagination and restriction in terms of a leap; when a person leaps they escape gravity for a moment but submit to its pull as they land.[113] Eslinger uses the term ‘conformative imagination’ to describe imagination guided by doctrine rather than restricted by it. Conformative imagination is being shaped by tradition, this does not result in rigid conformity, conflict is assumed.[114] Doctrine becomes the platform on which preachers stand and from which they imagine. Preachers stand in a tradition that embraces not just Scripture but the beliefs of the faithful down the ages, encapsulated in creeds and confessions and exercised in Christian practice. It is from this platform that preachers exercise imagination with creative freedom under the guidance of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit channels imagination into what Bruce calls ‘right seeing’ as part of God’s ongoing revelation.[115]

Tradition can be challenged and sometimes the means of that challenge can be found within the tradition itself. The impetus to change how slaves were treated was rooted in the Bible. Christians were active in the abolition movement; they reread the Bible and reinterpreted the tradition. The emphasis moved from the biblical acceptance of slavery, a fact of life in biblical times, to the biblical ideal of freedom centred on all made in the image of God, children of God and equal before God (Genesis 1:27–28; Galatians 3:28; I John 3:1).

Theological boundaries do not have to be perceived as restrictive; they can channel imaginative thinking. Creativity often needs constraint as it forces thinking beyond the obvious and can bring depth. Warren Wiersbe uses the analogy of a river; without boundaries a river becomes a swamp.[116] Peter Langland-Hassan names purpose as one constraint people put on imagination, for people can intervene in an imagining episode and direct its course. Without constraints, imagination can be ‘epistemically worthless’.[117] Molly Andrew’s description of imagination as ‘both anchored and transported’ is an apt summary of imagination that is both earthed yet free.[118]

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[112] Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart,* p. 27.
[113] David Ward, *Coleridge and the Nature of Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 54.
[114] Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination*, pp. 95–6.
[115] Bruce, *Igniting the Heart*. pp. 38–40.
[116] Wiersbe, *Preaching & Teaching with Imagination,* pp. 202–203.
[117] Peter Langland-Hassan, ‘On Choosing What to Imagine’, in *Knowledge Through Imagination*, ed. by Kind and Kung, pp. 61–64.
[118] Molly Andrews, p. 2.

Artists, like preachers, do not imagine in a vacuum; imagination is rooted in tradition, both artistic and theological. David Brown describes artists as developing new elements within a continuous creative tradition. Christian artistic tradition drew its strength from its ability to innovate from this standpoint.[119] Artists create details in their compositions not included in the Bible, but that imaginative invention is guided by the text.

8.9 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to free preachers to use their imagination in sermons whilst staying faithful to Scripture. To that end this section has reviewed attitudes to imagination in the Bible and through history. It has considered the roles of visual and textual imagination, different taxonomies and how imagination and reason can work together. Without imagination people cannot see the world as Scripture portrays it: sin defeated, death conquered, Christ triumphant. It takes imagination to live by an alternative Christian narrative. Theologically, this chapter has touched on how imagination relates to the image of God and revelation. The revelatory approach provides a pattern within which imagination can be exercised in all its functions.

[119] David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, p. 324.

General Conclusion

Methodology and structure

This thesis is theoretical rather than empirical; however, I wanted it to have practical outcomes and this aim had consequences for the methodology and the structure. A thesis that covered the theory and then looked for practical applications would not have been consistent with the approach I develop, which has relevance and implications woven throughout. I did not want dissonance between the style of the thesis and the style of the homiletical approach. As a result I opted for a mixed methodology and a two-part structure.

The initial theoretical section used reasoning skills to analyse and classify different plots and art styles. This involved creative thinking and synthesis as well as evaluation, analysis and explanation. The implications were then worked through in a practical preaching approach in chapter four. Starting with practice would have been my preferred option, but the new form meant that I had to establish the approach first. The practice detailed in chapter four became the practice that posed questions to the second part of the thesis and provided its response-driven structure. This structure and methodology draws on and adapts the contextual nature of practical theology where questions and arise from practice rather than theory being applied to practice. This methodology divides the thesis into two related sections.

Drawing the threads together

This thesis presents the case for the revelatory plot as way of developing an approach that is deeply embodied, invitational and has relevance threaded throughout in terms of identification and recognition. Some preachers instinctively preach in a form similar to the revelatory plot. This thesis articulates the form, develops it systematically and gives it defined expression and theological and philosophical underpinning. The aim is not to replace the resolution plot, rather it argues the case for the revelatory plot as an alternative way of designing sermons when the resolution plot may not be the most suitable form for the text or context.

I began by analysing the two plot styles, identifying their sources, their presence in the Bible and evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. The resolution plot was identified as leading on action and event, with an emphasis on cause and effect and a strong forward momentum leading to the resolution of a conflict,

problem or ambiguity. The revelatory plot was identified as prioritising character and insight, with insights embodied in things that can be sensed in some way. Movement is not necessarily linear and the use of time and language is creative and often scenic and impressionistic. The revelatory plot emphasises a showing style, a reflective pace, indirect cause and effect and more open endings. The characteristics of the revelatory plot detailed in chapter one provided an ongoing basis for discussion in subsequent chapters as do the three summary descriptors: embodied, invitational and relevant.

Chapter two carried on the assessment of the two plot styles and the influence of the resolution plot was evaluated. The evaluation considered the extent to which some of the characteristics of the revelatory plot, particularly embodiment, already had purchase within the homiletical literature and whether there was a basis for a more embodied approach. The presence of these characteristics means that a change to a revelatory approach would involve minimal adjustments in some areas but the degree of embodiment involved in the revelatory plot would require a significant change in thinking and style. The theological foundations of a revelatory plot approach are in the doctrines of embodiment, the imago Dei, incarnation and revelation. The first of these doctrines closes chapter two. Embodiment, noted as a key characteristic in chapter one, is rooted in biblical views of the body and the material world as the good creation of God. Although the Fall affects all of creation, including humanity, it still bears the stamp of its creator. There is no theological reason why spiritual insights cannot be embodied in people and in the material world as problems are defined in terms of sin, not materiality.

Chapter three took the revelatory characteristics identified in chapter one and the three descriptors and explored monoscenic, synoptic and simultaneous art in relation to these. These three representational forms of narrative art are by nature embodied and invitational. The viewer is active in seeking meaning and making connections, for although art narrates and artists have some means of direction, it is less precise than text. In art, ideas are embodied in people and scenes, and reified in objects and gestures. Narrative art does more than repeat the storyline in a different form, it is an invitation to learning, contemplation and interpretation.

Relevance is signalled by the specific nature of the scenes and the detailing of people, which allows for the possibility of recognition and identification. Chapter three develops the theology that underpins learning from artists through an understanding of the concept of the image of God in humanity. The image may not

be precisely defined and it is marred by the Fall but its presence means that preachers can discerningly draw on the work of artists, and others, who may not identify as Christians.

Drawing on chapters one to three, chapter four created a three-stage incarnational model for preaching that majors on three key characteristics of the revelatory plot: character, embodied insight and laying bare/showing. It integrates art, is immersed in the biblical text and scholarship, and earthed in the realities reflected in biblical narratives. The model is deeply embodied, turning the often-brief biblical narratives into sensed experience. Insights are located and how they are embodied is discussed. The model uses the showing style of the revelatory plot and aims to reveal the relevance of a narrative rather than apply it. This showing style is detailed and creative in order to foster recognition and identification. However, this creative form is under the control of the 'God-sense' of the text. Epilogues are developed as one way of ending with possibilities rather than tight conclusions, reflecting the revelatory plot's invitational nature. Theologically, this approach is rooted in the incarnation, and is related to the embodiment of chapter two. Alongside embodiment, incarnation shows that the things of this world can have spiritual significance and value.

Chapter five is the first of four responses to the practical preaching model of chapter four. The issue concerned ways in which language is able to reflect the real world and carry a sense of the real. Critical realism was identified as the philosophical standpoint so that use of the words 'real' and 'reality' are understood in nuanced ways. One aim of chapter five was to explore language that enables recognition and identification when presenting biblical narratives so that congregants recognize biblical narratives and the truths they contain as pertinent to their lives. This continues the ongoing emphasis on integrated relevance. The chapter details language that is creative and invitational, with the aim of evoking a response that involves head and heart but does not overwhelm or manipulate. Language can be creative and remain faithful to the text and have a form of experiential precision, which is crucial if biblical texts are to be perceived as relevant. An emphasis on creative language does not eschew explanatory and informational language; prologues are suggested as a way two language styles can exist in the same sermon. The twice-told format, drawing on the examples of double narratives in the Bible, is another way of combining two language styles.

Chapter six responded to issues of interpretation relating to textual and visual narratives raised by the chapters three and four. It aimed to identify a hermeneutic that is hospitable to an embodied, relevant and invitational approach. The roles of author/artist, text/artwork and reader/viewer were discussed and a cooperative hermeneutic was identified where the three centres of authority were held in tension in order to create an arena where meaning is explored. Continuing with the critical realist stance detailed in chapter five, this chapter considered how texts relate to reality and how reality in the form of an original situation exercises some control over meaning. This, alongside the role of the reader as interpreter, gives texts and artworks both stability and flexibility. The role of the reader/viewer is preserved but in cooperation with author/artist and text/artwork.

There is freedom in interpretation but it is a bounded freedom, there is a responsibility to the text, which raises issues of precision and faithfulness. These subjects from chapter five are developed, exploring what constitutes faithfulness and precision. The invitational nature of the approach is preserved as the reader is neither passive nor dominant but engages with the text while exercising hermeneutic virtues. The relationship to reality, a central issue of chapter five, is also crucial in terms of enacting meaning in the world. Hermeneutics is not an abstract discipline, for preachers it is about discerning meaning for Christian living. Cause and effect and speech-act theory form part of this discussion as they concern the effects of speech in the real world and how meaning is embodied in ways of living.

Chapter seven picked up epistemological issues raised by chapter four. These issues concern how people come to know through an approach that is creative, non-linear and is concerned with displaying rather than presenting arguments and explanations. This chapter described a form of knowing that comes through pattern recognition rather than linear logic and integrated imagination and emotion. It is a form of knowing that bridges gaps through intuitive knowledge, which works with the gaps and ambiguity of the revelatory plot identified in chapter one. Chapter seven also explores the issue of the precision in this type of knowing, a subject considered in chapters five and six.

The type of knowing that channels people into a fixed response was recognized as being unsuitable for the revelatory approach that is invitational. Understanding and recognition rather than accumulation of information were identified as appropriate goals. The knowing that comes through narrative is specific but that specificity aids generalisation since knowing something in detail can enable

recognition in different situations, a skill needed for perceiving relevance. The personal knowing detailed in this chapter is consistent with an embodied approach detailed in chapter two. People come to know through concepts that are embodied in people and situations within narratives. Chapter seven also followed up the attitudinal section of chapter six, exploring the attitudes needed for this personal and creative form of knowing.

Theologically chapter seven explored revelation as the complement to knowing presenting a broad understanding of general revelation exhibited in creation, culture and event, understood within the framework of the revelation of Christ through Scripture. This is compatible with the revelatory approach detailed in chapters one to four where insights may come through people and situations. This links to the image of God discussion of chapter three where insights may come through artworks created by artists who may not identify as Christian.

The final chapter draws together many of the threads in this thesis as it explores the subject of imagination. Imagination is involved in every part of revelatory preaching, which provides a framework for the exercise of the imagination in all its functions. Chapter eight is a response to the creative and imaginative aspects of the revelatory plot detailed in chapter one and developed in chapter four. It seeks to free preachers to both use their imagination and stay faithful to Scripture, an issue from chapters five and six. In the light of this objective, chapter eight considered hesitations preachers may have concerning the imagination and it aimed to allay those anxieties by deepening the understanding of what imagination is, its scriptural foundations and the witness of Christian attitudes down the ages.

The role of the imagination in preaching connects to the issue of the freedom of preachers to interpret texts and develop details reviewed in chapters four and six. Chapter eight takes the subject of precision discussed in terms of language and knowing in chapters five and seven and reflects on different types of precision. Theologically, Garret Green's suggestion of the imagination as the locus for revelation links to the discussion of revelation in chapter seven. Imagination also has strong links to creativity as one way of understanding the nature of the image of God in humanity considered in chapter three.

As with previous chapters, this final chapter looks at the contribution of imagination in delivering an embodied approach that is invitational and relevant. Imagination in its sense function continues the embodied aspect by being concrete and particular. The intuitive function of imagination relates to the pattern recognition

route to insight and Polanyi's intuitive leap detailed in the discussion of epistemology. In affective mode imagination links to empathetic knowledge but it must not overwhelm if the invitational nature of this approach is to be maintained. Intellectual imagination is also pertinent being invitational, as it allows people to follow an idea without commitment to it. It is imagination that enables the preacher to paint scenes and people with words in a way that congregants can relate to and perceive as relevant. Without imagination biblical characters can stay trapped within the text, it is imagination, expressed in the final stage of the preaching model of chapter four that enables believers of the past to talk to believers today.

Future work

There remains the question of further research. Only one form of preaching based on the revelatory plot is detailed in this thesis, other ways of developing sermons based on this plot form could be researched. One of the crucial issues is how language, a human construct, relates to reality. I discussed this in relation to critical realism but this could be developed in philosophy and linguistics with a particular reference to homiletics. Language also raises the issue of *triggering* a sense of the real, which concerns how language is received and the body's reaction to language. This is an issue for neuroscience and psychology, currently phrased as 'the science if stories'. There exists a corpus of research concerning the bodily reactions to narrative but the narrative forms used in some of the experiments were very simple and some of the writing is reductionist in nature. Too often sermons are labelled as a passive form but some of the indications from research in this area suggest much is happening in the body in response to narratives. Further research is needed that uses more complex narration, non-reductionist ways of understanding what is happening, and ways in which it could link to narrative preaching. Sanford and Emmott's *Mind, Brain and Narrative* references much of this research.[1]

I have drawn on practical theology in a very general way. Work could be done on other aspects of practical theology that relate to this subject. Art is integrated throughout this thesis but its varied roles in preaching have not been developed in detail. There are many resources on art and theology but few that develop the thinking around art's multiple roles in homiletics. I have used biblical narrative representational art, but there are many other styles that have potential for preaching.

[1] Anthony J. Sanford, and Catherine Emmott, *Mind, Brain and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

I refer briefly to 'toggling', the ability of congregants to 'toggle' between the situation in a narrative presented by a preacher and their own situation. Toggling raises a number of questions: how is it enabled and what hinders it? What is going on within people as they toggle? How valid is toggling between an ancient situation and a contemporary one? These could form the basis for a research project.

Implications for the training of preachers

The revelatory plot has implications for the training of preachers. The three descriptors: invitational, relevant and embodied entail preachers coming to a text in a mode that may be different to the one they are used to. Embodiment and staying in the world of the text requires holding in check for a while the imperative drive to understand the meaning of the text. This can feel counter-intuitive. Preachers may even feel it is 'unspiritual' to take time to focus on the physical, social, political and emotional lives of the characters and their situation as well as the spiritual. Time in training needs to be given to embodiment as a key skill.

The invitational aspect of this style of preaching could also mean a change in training when considering how biblical texts relate to contemporary Christian living. Moving to a showing style and revealing relevance (where appropriate) rather than application is a move that will need supporting as it is probably contra to preacher expectations.

The move from application to implication, recognition and identification involves relinquishing some of the control of the preacher. Encouraging preachers to step back and let the text do much of the work can be difficult for preachers and only works if the ideas are thoroughly embodied and shown. This is likely to be particularly difficult for new preachers. It is reassuring to have a sermon where everything is tied up, where applications are listed at the end and there is a feeling of having 'mastered' a text. Mastery is not appropriate and trying to find the balance between implications being too directive and being too open ended is difficult and probably only communicated by practise and examples rather than lectures.

The showing style needs teaching time given to language: tenses, metaphor, framing etc. This may not normally be included in preacher training as it sounds like an English session. Some preachers can use language in this way intuitively, others will be able to use such language with help. All these lines of enquiry demonstrate the future potential of looking at various aspects of the revelatory plot.

Appendix 1: Sermon by Richard Briggs

Richard Briggs' sermon on Jephthah handles a difficult subject sensitively without avoiding the main issues. The emphasis is on revealing the character of Jephthah and his situation. There is no relentless move towards resolution, rather the sermon ends with minimal closure, appropriate to its purpose to introduce Lent. The sermon is deeply intratextual, texts such as John the Baptist, the story of Joseph and the Prodigal Son are used to understand the story of Jephthah. There is also intertextuality as texts such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, shed light on Jephthah's story.

Judges 11.28 – 40 Richard Briggs[1]

'But the king of the Ammonites did not heed the message that Jephthah sent to him. (Judges 11.28)

[A] Welcome to Lent.
Set the controls for the heart of darkness.
Meet Jephthah.
Our tale unfolds in three scenes. We'll take them in reverse order, given that the final one somewhat over balances the narrative, and you almost certainly can't get it out of your head. So: fade-up one scene 3…

[B] We're with Jephthah, in the back of the stagecoach, returning hot foot from victory against the Ammonites. Slaughter against all the odds. Twenty towns laid waste. And a big hero's welcome, at the town hall, tomorrow, interview in the *Gilead Gazette*, all good. Must go home and meet the family first, Mrs J, and his little girl, the apple of his eye, his one and only offspring, daughter of the all-conquering chief.

He's riding in the stagecoach, bouncing along, humming a happy tune, glancing to the horizon, slightly nervous, barely able to articulate the nagging thought at the back of his mind, that this has been one hell of a military campaign. He had felt the spirit of the Lord coursing through him, that exquisite sense that

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[1] Core elements of the sermon were subsequently reappropriated for a written reflection, 'Frailty, thy Name is Jephthah: The Tragedy of Judges 11', that appeared in Briggs, R. S., Fairer Sex: Spiritual Readings of Four Old Testament Passages About Men and Women. Grove books, Cambridge, 2015, pp. 16 – 20, and we are grateful to Ian Paul at Grove books for permission to reuse much of that text.

every exploit and every heartbeat had been dedicated to the Lord. Then, somewhere, perhaps when they'd just been rolling the landing craft on to the Normandy beaches, and his heart had been in a his mouth, he'd flashed on thinking that he could show his devotion to the Lord by offering to dedicate to him the first living thing to come out and greet him from the doors of his house, when he returned victorious after the war, thinking that well, you never knew, maybe it would be the last promise he ever made, and maybe he would never make it back, and maybe God wasn't listening. But just in case, and just to do the best he could for his chances, he'd vowed a vow.

So there he is – bouncing down a dirt road to the imagined family version of the hero's welcome, but wondering who is coming out to meet him. Like Conrad's Marlow, sailing up the Congo into the heart of darkness. There's the sound of tambourines and singing, CNN is on in the background, the war is in the news, and there's a figure just emerging from behind the screen door. And the vow is weighing heavy on his heart…

[C]We turn back for a moment to scene two, earlier in the story. 'The spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah.' The man of God – scratch that – the mighty man of God. A judge, a deliverer, a man who gets to play a part in the story of Holy Scripture, reserving his seat right there for the roll call of heroes in Hebrews 11. The spirit of the Lord. What a vote of confidence: mightily used in the kingdom of God. Think of the ministry possibilities, not least the chance to take his testimony on the road – 'Ladies and gentlemen, tonight for one night only: "And then I felt the power of the Lord upon me … and verily did I slay the Ammonites, and hither and thither did we rock the Casbah".' So what's that about then? The enabling of the spirit of the Lord unto death and destruction? Did we swallow that camel only to strain at the end of the story? Note to self: scene two a bit problematic. Let's try scene one.

[D] Here beginneth the lesson, reading from Judges 11 verse 1: 'Now Jephthah the Gileadite'. Let me attempt a rough and literal translation of this opening verse: 'Now Jephthah the Gilead was a warrior of strength; and he / was the son / of a woman / of immorality.' Yep: the son of a prostitute, fathered – as verse 1 goes on to tell us with typical deadpan truthfulness – fathered by Gilead, possibly using his tribal name to stand in for his actual name, perhaps he paid good money to remain anonymous, since his starring role is not man's finest moment. Tough: in the process he also drags his entire tribe's name down with him. *Good old Gilead, Jephthah's Dad*.

Gilead's wife also bore him sons. Except that Mrs Gilead's sons didn't much care for the son of the prostitute, and to cite the wondrous King James Version: 'And Gilead's wife bare him sons; and his wife's sons grew up, and they thrust out Jephthah, and they said unto him, "Bugger off; for thou *art* the son of a strange woman."' Thus Jephthah finds himself in the land of Tob, meaning 'good', incidentally; kicked out into a good land (there may be a sermon in that, for another occasion), ending up surrounded by what the passage calls *anashimreyqim,* which the King James translated as 'vain men'; the NIV went for 'a group of adventurers'; the NRSV phones in from the Wild West to suggest 'Outlaws'; and the ESV, in breaking news from Cambridge, suggests 'worthless fellows'. Cads and bounders the lot of them. Those first three verses of chapter 11 are a brutal character portrait: son of a whore, kicked out by his half-brothers, spending his life in riotous living in some kind of supposedly promised land. Tell me, honestly, answer me this: is Jephthah a man who (a) grew up understanding the value of women and the need to treat them with respect, care, attention and love; or is he (b) not?

[A] The story turns round. When the war with the Ammonites comes, Jephthah negotiated his way back into the family, persuading the people to promise that if he wins the war, he can become their head and commander. Jephthah the judge. Has a nice ring to it. How great to remembered for ever more by the people of God?

[B] So then. Here, at long last, Jephthah is coming home. Back from the so-called promised land, the outlaws and vain men, the squandered life, the hurting youth, the terrible back story. Home he heads as victor, man of God, mighty warrior. Rattling along in the stagecoach, towards his own high noon, with the only cloud on the horizon, no bigger than a man's hand, the knowledge that he vowed that vow; but still, back from the dead, back from eating the food that was only fit for the pigs, back to triumph over the brothers who sold him into slavery, waiting only for the final triumph, the final affirmation, the final 'yes' to all his fears and insecurities, the figure of the welcoming father running down the road, the killing of the fatted calf, the embrace of eternity, the 'well done, good and faithful son' that he has so longed to hear…

The screen door slams. Her dress sways.
Like a vision she dances across the porch as a radio plays.
It's his daughter.

[C] Time freezes. The camera circles around them. No other sound is heard at this still centre of the oncoming storm.
'Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low… For I have vowed.
And what's that she says in response? Is it something like: 'May it be to me according to your word?

It's his daughter.

Kyrie Eleison – Lord have mercy –
Christe Eleison – Christ have mercy –
Kyrie Eleison – Lord have mercy.

Well, what did you come out into the desert to see? A sermon swayed by the wind? If not, what did you come out to see? A text of tall tales dressed in fine clothes? But what then did you come out to see? The truth? Yes, I put it to you, Holy Scripture compels us to face the truth.

[D] Now we all know plenty of visionary and inspiring passages of the Bible that lived up our eyes and spirits to the far horizon, and speed us on our way to happier times. But we also know that there are passages like this, that point resolutely downwards, inwards, relentlessly, right into the heart of darkness.

We know we need this. In our finest moments, we know we need a God and a Scripture that has stared down the worst that we can throw at it, and that cannot be shocked by our terrors and traumas, by any sin we might manage to come up with – and yes, I know there are people in this world who believe that sin is just an old-fashioned idea and that we've all matured out of that now – but frankly, they've probably not chosen to be here this evening to welcome Lent by taking communion, and anyway it's not about your neighbour, it's about you, it's about us, it's about our own darkness.

And is there is a word of life here, it lies on the path that takes us right through the middle of all our failings, writ large, and touched and bought close to God by texts such as this.

[A] So all you mighty men, going great guns for the gospel, especially if the spirit of the Lord is upon you. Take care when you stretch to thinking that maybe you're fighting the good fight will get you remembered in history books. What will you be

remembered for? It isn’t about success. It’s never about your own glory. And most specifically, it isn’t about your mission mattering more than your daughter, your wife – your family – your household. Having a name in the history books puts you in the company of Jephthah. Is that really what you are signing up for?

[B] And, for all you wonderful women, there is hard news. The story of Jephthah’s daughter could be speaking to and for you. If you haven’t already experienced it, though surely you have, you will encounter the deadening truth that some men in power see you as part of their own power-play. Did you hear Jephthah’s words when he finds that it is his daughter coming out to meet him: ‘You have bought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me.’ That sounds so uncomfortably close to saying it’s all her fault. Adam blamed Eve, and from that moment it has been ever thus. She accepts her fate, and bewails her virginity, almost certainly unto death, even though the hermeneutical lawyers are out in force seeking to commute the sentence to life in a nunnery. Personally, I do not think they will succeed. Would it have been kinder to hope that maybe all will work out for the best in the best of all possible worlds? Or is there releasing knowing that, when it doesn’t, you are not alone?

[C] But actually is not really about men and women; or rather – the failings are not specifically or necessarily pride for men and prejudice for women. I’ve known women in power who have used words as badly as Jephthah did with his daughter, and I’ve known men ground into the earth by those who should have been their shepherds. So all in all, on this side of the Resurrection it’s a tragedy.

Jephthah is a tragic figure. Locked into an inability to receive God’s good gifts – the Holy Spirit; restoration to his family and his people – unable to receive them without adding to them a vow that will end up costing his family. In the heat of the moment: one tragic move, with endless consequences. Traced back, we have discovered, to his idiot father, father Gilead, who had many sons, one of whom was the fruit of his liaison with a prostitute. Another tragic moment, with endless consequences.

But is it not *good* news that Holy Scripture is there, ahead of you, when you finally find yourself in that darkest place?

[D] So to end: welcome to Lent. There are two important things you need to know about Lent. One: sometimes it is Lent. Two: other times it is not Lent. Time is not just ‘one damn thing after another’, nor indeed ‘one blessed day after another’. It comes and goes in seasons: of joy and despair, of fruitfulness and barrenness, of life and death.

[A *Now circling round and towards the communion table*] Today it *is* Lent. We offer ourselves in penitence, mindful of our sin. On the one hand, Lent says: ‘Not so fast, hold the hallelujahs, there will be time for them on Easter day, on the far side of the journey we now undertake.’ On the other hand, Lent says: [*now standing over the table*] ‘Take, and eat; in this brokenness lies the light that is not overcome by the darkness, and the tragedy that turns out to be for the healing of the world.’

In the meantime, lament with the women of Israel, for the daughter of Jephthah is dead. It is not all right. Everything is not all right.

Welcome to Lent.

Set your course for the heart of darkness.

Meet Jephthah.

Richard Briggs, ‘Judges 11: 28–40’, in *Wrestling with the Word: Preaching Tricky Texts*. ed. by Kate Bruce and Jamie Harrison (London: The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 2016), pp. 64-70, 83. ISBN 9780281076482. Reproduced with permission of The Licensor through PLSclear

Note: The letters in the sermon text, corelate to physical movement in the sermon delivery. Preaching in the round with a circular communion table at the centre, Richard Briggs used movement to help narrate action. Imagine the four points of a compass as A, B, C and D, each one situated inside the circle of the congregation, facing the communion table, and at the head of each ‘aisle’ between the seating. The points at which Briggs moves to these four locations are marked in the sermon above. The result was that the various episodes and perspectives of the text were all recounted from different spaces; re-circling the table allowed a sense of reprising perspectives made earlier. In the final section, the preacher approached the table, and finished with hands held wide open over the elements. The eucharistic setting enabled the sermon to be preached as Christian good news, allowing the text’s focus on tragedy to be taken up into a wider act of memorial and celebration.

Appendix 2: Leaving Egypt and Making the Golden Calf: Biblical Bling

Reference: Old Testament, Exodus 12.35-36; 32.1-5; 21.5-6

Structure: Twice-told

Notes for Preachers

- ***Insight***

In making the golden calf, the Israelites substituted worship of the sovereign God for a God they could control. We often miss what the slaves sacrificed to make the golden calf because we are too quick to condemn the idolatry; we do not look at what provoked it.

- ***Embodiment***

The sacrifice the ex-slaves made to create the golden calf is embodied in giving up the earrings they had been given when they left Egypt. This was probably the first time they had owned anything valuable and yet they give up the earrings. The ex-slaves' depth of anxiety, insecurity and need for control is embodied in those earrings, and what they lost is embodied in the holes the earrings left.

- ***General***

The earrings and the holes in the ears are both physical realities and symbols. They symbolise the depth of anxiety concerning control and also the emptiness left behind after they have disobeyed God. In Exodus, the boring of a hole in the ear is the mark of a slave. If you wear earrings these can become part of the sermon and taken out at the appropriate point.

Sermon

First Telling

The Hebrew slaves have been in Egypt for hundreds of years and tales of their Hebrew ancestors — Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph — are still told, but they are distant figures from another land. These figures have receded deep into the past for this generation, they are shadowy figures in stories told by the old ones round the fire. Egypt is the only home these slaves have ever known. Their ancestors came to Egypt as guests when a Hebrew, Joseph, was powerful in the land. They had been welcomed then, for Joseph had saved the Egyptians from starvation when famine hit

Egypt. Pharaoh had been grateful and invited Joseph's people to settle in Egypt. They came as honoured guests and were given land in Goshen, on the eastern border.

The Hebrews may have been honoured guests, but they were not Egyptian, they did things differently; they looked different, dressed different and they worshipped a different God. By settling them in Goshen, the Egyptians kept the Hebrews at a distance, away from the mainstream of Egyptian life. To begin with, gratitude overcame prejudice, but people have short memories; the debt owed to Joseph slipped into the past, now all the Egyptians saw was foreigners living on the border. Could they trust them? There were so many of them, the Egyptians feared being swamped by these immigrants. They might side with an enemy.

Ingratitude turned to suspicion, and the Hebrews were enslaved. Suspicion turned to oppression and life was made bitter for them. Distrust turned to fear, and the Hebrews became a problem to be solved by ethnic cleansing, all the boy babies were to be killed. But they did not all die, courage shown by two women saved many babies at birth. The hand of God and the ingenuity of one family saved baby Moses who grew up to lead his people to freedom, and that is where our reading starts.

The Hebrews are all packed and ready to go, but before leaving God tells them to go to their Egyptian neighbours and ask for a parting gift. Strangely enough the Egyptians give (glad to be rid of them) and the Hebrews leave with clothes and jewellery. After four hundred years they are ready to say goodbye to Egypt and follow Moses to the Promised Land. These are no longer Hebrew slaves; they are citizens of a nation that does not yet occur on any map. The Promised Land lies in the future, they have a desert to cross first and many difficulties on the way. They wander through the desert, led by God's pillar of cloud and fire all the way to Mount Sinai, where Moses goes up the mountain to talk to God. While Moses is away the people begin to worry that he may not be coming back. There they are in the middle of the desert; can they really trust God to continue leading them? The wilderness is vast, and orienteering is not part of the average slave skill set. Moses is the man with the map, and he has disappeared up a mountain. In their anxiety, they give up the gold earrings the Egyptians gave them, and they make a golden calf, a god of gold: predictable, safe, controllable. The Hebrews have travelled many miles from Egypt of Sinai but this story is about more than miles covered, it is also about a spiritual journey We return to the beginning of this story and follow the ex-slaves as they leave Egypt on their spiritual journey to Sinai. ***Pause***

Second telling

So here we are, Goshen, Egypt,
the slave quarter,
the run-down estate on the edge of town,
the postcode nobody wants.
This is the home of the Hebrew slaves,
Pharaoh's brickies, building his cities
with their blood and sweat.
We see them in our minds,
crumpled tunics and unfashionable sandals,
extras from an old Biblical film.
Not like us.
The slaves are getting ready to leave
and we imagine a straggly line of ill-clad people,
but maybe we've got it wrong,
were they really such a shabby crowd?
Depending on the taste of the Egyptians,
these slaves could have been more Prada than Primark,
for the Bible says the Lord turned the hearts of the Egyptians
and each Hebrew asked of their neighbour, silver and gold and clothes
and the Egyptians gave!
They gave generously, glad to be rid of these Hebrews.
The slaves did not leave Egypt empty-handed,
they left with silver and gold and they wore their wealth in the desert.
It swung from their ears,
it flashed in the sunlight, biblical bling.
It announced to the world: 'We are not slaves,
we own things!'
And so they left Egypt,
entered the desert years,
wandered in God's wake,
came to Sinai.
Moses went up the mountain to speak with God
and they, the people, waited.
With the waiting came the doubts.

Where was this God?

Could he really lead them to safety?

They needed security.

They, who had been controlled so long,

needed to control.

They needed predictable gods.

For this they were willing to sacrifice.

They were willing to give up the plunder of Egypt,

to surrender the gold,

to take out the earrings and make their own god. [**remove earrings if worn**]

Too quickly we pass over the sacrifice,

for it was no light thing to give up the plunder of Egypt.

Did they notice the lack of weight in their ears,

no longer heavy with gold?

Did they feel the lack of movement as they turned their heads?

We are not told.

Did they miss the earrings?

The hands that gave the gold were not unwilling.

But we, who read the story, miss their sacrifice

in our eagerness to condemn.

These wearers of earrings had been slaves,

nobodies:

people who owned nothing;

people who were, themselves, owned;

people whose lives were parcelled out for them by others.

They took out the earrings.

But when the gold was gone, the holes remained.

A reminder of the day they traded the wild, free, grace of God,

the unpredictable, sovereign love of God, for a predictable god of gold.

They were left with holes in their ears,

the sign of a slave.

What depth of fear provoked such sacrifice?

Maybe there is safety in slavery,

if slavery is all you have ever known.

To step into an uncertain future is a daunting dream,

for it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a loving God
when that love may lead us through the wilderness,
as well as free us;
when that love may take us to places we would not choose to go,
as well as bless us.
The temptation is still to trade God’s untamed love for safety
and control,
but we are left with holes in our lives,
a reminder of what we have lost.

Appendix 3. Jesus is Baptised: God in the Crowd

Reference: New Testament, Matthew 3.13-17; Luke 3.21
Structure: With prologue and epilogue

Notes for preachers

- ***Insight***

Jesus identified with sinful humanity by being baptised by John.

- ***Embodiment***

Luke tells us that Jesus was baptised along with other people (Luke 3.21), not at some private ceremony. Jesus' identification with sinful humanity is embodied in his being baptised along with sinners. Becoming physically part of the crowd embodies that identification.

- ***General notes***

The Bible tells us that many came to be baptised (Mark 1.4-5) and John's Baptism was for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus became part of the crowd that came to be baptised. People react differently in crowds; some people react by keeping a distance between themselves and others because they see themselves as different, others don't mind the squash. We know from other gospel stories (Mark 5.24, 31) that Jesus was jostled in crowds and had no qualms about who touched him. He touched the dead, the 'unclean' and the rejected. Jesus also had no qualms about being associated with sinners (Mark 2.16).

Sermon

Prologue

The Judean desert gives way abruptly to the lush Jordan valley, its waters deep in the rift below. The river snakes its way towards the Dead Sea, cutting a green swathe through the wilderness. Crowds line the riverbank waiting to be baptised by John the Baptist: farmers and housewives; pimps and prostitutes, soldiers and tax collectors, the educated and the illiterate, sinners of every hue and every degree. Somewhere in this crowd is Jesus. He is difficult to find, for nothing marks him out as different and

that is how he likes it. He is one with them, he does not queue jump, he waits his turn. He does not ask for a private baptism. We join the story on the banks of the river Jordan. ***Pause***

Jesus stands on the banks of the river,
one of the crowd.
The crowd shuffles and moves forward;
their shoulders slumped,
weighed down with the shame they carry.

They stand together:
the pimps and the prostitutes,
the thieves and the cheats.
They rub shoulders with the ordinary sinners
guilty of more everyday sins,
mundane failures and betrayals.

What do you call a crowd of sinners?
What collective noun applies?
Not a pride,
for they have none.
Not a nest,
for some have been ejected from the family home.
Maybe a clutch,
for they cling together in joint misery and hope.
They look towards the river,
to John, to the man who offers hope:
a fresh start,
a cleaner way of living,
someone who will lift the burden they carry.

The crowd moves forward.
Some are careful to keep their distance,
preserving a personal space between them and other sinners.
These are the white-collar sinners.
They tell themselves they are different,

but their wilting bodies tell another tale;
they are not convinced by their own story.

Among the crowd stands one who is different,
but you would not know it.
He wears the clothes of a working man,
he is jostled by the crowd,
he makes contact with his neighbours
with eye and word.
He smiles at the white-collar sinners,
the blue-collar sinners
and those with no collars at all.
No T-shirt slogan declares him innocent.
No halo marks him as holy.
His clothes emit no glow.
He is God in the crowd.
One of us.
Emmanuel.

God in the crowd looks like the man next to him,
who could be a con-man.
His feet are as dirty as the woman to his right,
who could be a thief.
He does not avoid the pimps.
To his neighbours he is just one more sinner
who hopes that life can be different;
who clings to the possibility
that the river might wash away guilt
and God may forgive.

God in the crowd has his feet firmly planted on the earth.
Careless of his reputation
he mingles.
Every contact confirms his decision
to take the human option,

a decision that began at Nazareth
in a virgin's womb.

As Jesus steps into the river
John whispers,
'Not you, you have no need.'
'Yes,' says Jesus.
Carrying the sins of the world did not begin at the cross,
it began so much earlier,
when he decided on no degree of separation,
no clear blue water between him and sinners.
The same waters of the Jordan flowed over Jesus and sinners,
but for him they lifted no burden of sin,
for there was none.

As he rises from the waters
God's Spirit descends like a dove
and a voice from heaven declares,
'This is my Son,
my beloved Son,
in whom I am well pleased.'

Jesus wades to the bank,
His Fathers words echoing in his mind.
His Father is well pleased,
well pleased with a Son who
stands shoulder to shoulder with sinners.

Epilogue

We leave Jesus standing on the bank,
joining a band of wet, forgiven sinners,
all smiling now and slowly drying in the sun.
And in that action Jesus,
the one heaven declared to be Son of God,
shows us how to be with others.
He did not maintain his distance.

He did not stand apart and condemn.
He did not stand on the side-lines and judge.
He stood with people.
But distance is not always measured by a ruler.
Distance can be an attitude.
It is easy to help those who are troubled
from a position of emotional security.
It is easy to counsel those whose life is a mess
from position of feeling we have life sorted.
It is easy to sympathise with the weak
from a position of strength.
We need to know our vulnerability
or such counsel will not truly help others,
for it comes from a place that is distant,
superior, safe.
We need to know our shortcomings, our fragility,
and be aware that it would take very little
for us to become troubled,
for our lives to be a mess.
That way we close the gap and stand beside people,
forever saying,
'There but for the grace of God go I.'

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