

[MJTM 25 (2023–2024)]

BOOK REVIEW

Paul E. Koptak. *Circles in the Stream: Index, Identification, and Intertext—Reading and Preaching the Story of Judah in Genesis 37–50*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022. Pbk. 133 pp. ISBN 9781666735321. \$20.75.

“Make it practical, preacher!” In my early years as a preaching pastor, one of my older parishioners would complain that my sermons were not “practical enough.” In his mind, whenever Holy Scripture is expounded, there should be an immediate application between the ancient text and everyday life that any well-intended congregant could put into practice as soon as they exited the worship service. Needless to say, the pressure to make every biblical text *practical* and relatable became an added stress to my sermon preparation.

In *Circles in the Stream*, Paul E. Koptak relieves preachers of this kind of duress by providing a creative and robust approach to biblical interpretation that helps identify and meaningfully connect the *real life issues* described in the biblical story with those of contemporary readers. Building on the insights of literary critic Kenneth Burke, Koptak offers a “practical literary-rhetorical-theological pathway that leads to those connections” (3) based on three contexts: *index* (the connections within a given passage), *identification* (identifying the “life issues” raised within the text), and *intertext* (how the text connects with the rest of biblical canon). I will briefly summarize each of Koptak’s steps below.

Indexing seeks to discover the writer’s own rhetorical purpose by carefully observing how the text is constructed. What conflicts and contrasts, movements and/or changes occur in the text? What terms are repeated and emphasized? As careful attention is given those dynamics, Koptak states that the “writer’s rhetorical

purpose will come light as you note the connections within the work itself" (13). The next step is *identification*, wherein the "life issue(s)" which both the biblical writers and readers may share are identified. Following Burke's theory of "consubstantiality" (literally, standing together), Koptak suggests that writers use "the ideas and views that an audience holds in common to achieve artistic effects" (8). What this means is that a "work of literary art, based on shared human experience, can work a symbolic cure as both author and audience experience a transformation through the writer's 'medicine'" (8). In terms of biblical texts, readers can discover the writer's "strategy for coping" by looking for the significant terms and ways by which the writer moves towards resolving a "life issue" which audiences can then make their own (27).

Finally, Koptak claims that since the "Scriptures in all their variation tell one great story of God creating, calling, saving, healing, reconciling" then preachers and teachers can "help listeners find their way into that story if we follow the ever-widening circles that move out from a single text through the entire Bible and into our lives" (14). Again following Burke, who compares the ongoing interactions between situations, writers, texts and readers to being at a party where "one arrives, gets a sense of a conversation, participates a bit, then takes leave even as the conversation continues" (107), Koptak suggests that intertextual study for preaching recognizes how the biblical writers responded to situations by entering into a wider conversation with the whole of Scripture, and are thus "encouraging us to do the same" (107).

Koptak proposes that this three-fold approach to reading Scripture will help "find the connections already present within a given text, between other writings, and in the common identification with life experiences" (14). To demonstrate this, Koptak spends the core of the book taking readers on a step-by-step journey through Gen 37–50 by focusing on the *life* experiences of Judah. Each chapter focuses on a particular episode in Judah's life and is framed by one of the three components of Koptak's proposed reading strategy. In chapter 1, Koptak analyzes the account of Judah and Tamar in Gen 38 by showing how *indexing*

works. Chapter 2 concentrates on the story of Joseph, where Koptak develops his notion of *identification*. In chapter 3, Koptak ties his analysis together by showing how the reception of Jacob's blessing on Judah and his brothers resolves the *life issues* raised in the previous accounts of Tamar and Joseph, and reverberates *intertextually* throughout the biblical canon by reminding readers that the God of the Bible is one who cares deeply about righteousness, protects his people and intends to still unify them as one (despite their seemingly best efforts at dividing themselves).

What emerges from *Circles in the Stream* is not only a satisfying interpretation of what can sometimes be a confusing episode within the biblical story (i.e., how are we to understand the tragedies and triumphs of Jacob's seemingly dysfunctional family in light of God's overall plans?) but also a very practical guide for how preachers and teachers can meaningfully connect the *real life issues* discovered in the text with the *real life issues* contemporary audiences face. To further assist, Koptak includes a sample sermon in each chapter, illustrating how one might put each of his interpretive steps into practice. Though Koptak's prose is conversational and easy to follow, one should not make the mistake of assuming this slim volume lacks rigor. The depth of Koptak's analysis, his ability to translate Burke's philosophy into something useful for preaching, and his command of current trends in biblical scholarship impresses.

Circles in the Stream will be most useful for those whose primary vocation is teaching and preaching biblical texts, whether in the church or the academy. However, lay readers who have had some exposure to biblical scholarship and want to explore a more advanced approach to interpreting Scripture will also benefit. While the examples he uses are primarily drawn from Genesis, Koptak's interpretive approach will prove to be very useful in interpreting the New Testament, especially the Gospels and Acts. In a guild flooded with literature on the latest interpretive novelty (most of which has little bearing on the ministries of those who are actually called to the arduous task of making Scripture *applicable* to everyday people), Koptak is to be commended for producing a concise, in-depth (but not overly techni-

R4 *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 25

cal), and eminently practical guide for how preachers and teachers may thoughtfully connect the *world* of the text with the *world* of today's readers.

Grant C. Clay
Corban University
Salem, OR