Does Public Theology Need Its Own Hermeneutic?

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Preacher: Chris Oswald

[0:00] Thank you.

Thank you.
I provided a little different intro music today because this podcast is not, strictly speaking, meant for the congregation of Providence Community Church. Pretty much everything I do on this podcast is simply meant to serve our particular congregation, and though other people outside of our church do listen to the podcast, today I'm actually just, I'm really just starting a conversation with a line of thinking I've been having related to public theology and exegesis, public theology and hermeneutics.
How are we to use the scriptures when it comes to sorting out, making sense of public circumstances, national aspirations, political situations, and so on and so forth.
And this podcast is certainly not the last word on this subject. I actually am coming to this particular podcast with more questions than answers, more observations than anything else.
[1:57] This all began because I was preparing some work on a brief overview for my sermon introduction this Sunday, which is the sermon that's leading up to July 4th.

I wanted to do just a brief overview of the Exodus story in the history of America. And that story is really pronounced in a few phases of American history.
There's a book actually written by a man named Bruce Feeler, I believe his last name is F-E-I-L-E-R. The book's called How the Story of Moses Shaped America.
And I haven't read the book in its entirety, just scanned it, but I did feel like I developed at least one question or one thought that I wanted to pass on.
And so this podcast is probably mostly for the fellow pastors who listen to this podcast. And it's really mostly just to start a conversation about something that I've observed about related to our exegetical approaches when it comes to public theology, theology that is used in the political realm and the cultural realm and so on and so forth.
[3:15] So let me just go as a way of kind of warming up to this, go through the three main uses of the Exodus story in the history of America. And the first one, of course, would be with the pilgrims going back to something like 1620, 1630.

Bruce Feeler in his book says, When they embarked on the Mayflower in 1620, they described themselves, the pilgrims, described themselves as the chosen people fleeing their pharaoh, King James.
On the Atlantic, their leader, William Bradford, proclaimed their journey to be as vital as Moses and the Israelites when they went out of Egypt. And when they arrived in Cape Cod, they thanked God for letting them pass through their own fiery Red Sea.
Here's a quote particular, specifically from William Bradford, who was the leader of that original sort of Mayflower movement. He said, Our fathers were Englishmen who came over the great ocean and were ready to perish in the wilderness.
But they cried to the Lord and he heard their voice and looked on their adversity. Yes, let them who have been redeemed of the Lord show how he has delivered them from the hand of their oppressor.
[4:28] When they wandered forth into the desert wilderness out of the way and found no city to dwell in, both hungry and thirsty, their soul was overwhelmed in them. Let them confess before the Lord his loving kindness and his wonderful works before the sons of men.

In fact, Bradford began to be known as the Moses of Plymouth. And Plymouth itself was known to be little Israel. In another book, Gabriel Sivan writes in the Bible and Civilization, No Christian community in history identified more with the people of the book than did the early settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, who believed their own lives to be a literal reenactment of the biblical

drama of the Hebrew nation.
So that's the first use of the Exodus story in American history. The second one would be in the 1776 period. We had the pilgrims first and now we've got the patriots.
More than a century or a half after the pilgrims arrived, the American colonies went to war against their British colonial masters in a struggle for independence, of course. And they leaned very heavily on the Exodus story as well.
In his pamphlet, Common Sense, which was published in January of 1776, which had a galvanizing effect on the American public, Thomas Paine described King George III as a sullen-tempered pharaoh, as the sullen-tempered pharaoh of England.
[5:58] And then, of course, on July 4th, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was ratified by the Continental Congress, but shortly before dismissing, one final piece of business was approved.

And this resolution reads, Resolved that Dr. Franklin, Mr. J. Adams, and Mr. Jefferson be a committee to bring in a device for a seal for the United States of America.
They wanted a seal, you know, for their letters and things like that, that would represent this new nation. In August 14th, 1776, John Adams writes Abigail and explains kind of how that process is going.
Ben Franklin, Adams wrote, suggests Moses lifting up his wand and dividing the Red Sea and Pharaoh and his chariot overwhelmed with the water. So that was Franklin's idea.
Ben Franklin's idea was this, that the United States seal should be Moses with the rod and the Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea, you know, succumbing.
[7:06] Franklin also wanted the phrase, rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God, accompanying that particular picture of Moses and Pharaoh in the Red Sea.

Thomas Jefferson also wanted an Exodus-driven motif. He wanted the children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a pillar of fire by night.
So two of the three, it's funny because Adams was probably the most, like, actually Christian of the three. And Adams actually wanted, like, a more Greek thing. He wanted Hercules and so on and so forth.
In the end, none of these seals were adopted. Something far more simple, that's the seal with the eagle and the arrows was adopted. But Thomas Jefferson actually took the phrase that Franklin introduced, rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God, and incorporated that in his personal seal and actually put that on the gate of his home.
So that's the second phase in American history in which the Exodus was significant. And the third was, of course, the slaves, beginning in around the same time, 1775, going all the way through the 1870s.
[8:18] There was a simultaneous movement at the same time that the patriots were uplifting Exodus as an example of justifying and sense-making for their particular political struggle.

The slaves were using the same story to describe their particular situation. The abolitionists also adopted this. And so one of the most famous, well, most of the famous songs amongst the slaves were Exodus-motifed.
One of those songs goes, The Lord by Moses to Pharaoh said, O let my people go. If not, I'll smite your firstborn dead. O let my people go.
O go down, Moses, away down to Egypt's land, and tell King Pharaoh to let my people go. Now, I'm not going to get into any kind of assessment of these movements and whether their use of the Exodus story was right or wrong, because that's not actually what I'm interested in discussing.
I am actually trying to start a discussion, especially with my fellow pastors, about the exegesis that was at work in that time. My sense is that the Western world was built on a particular kind of exegesis and Bible application that would absolutely be tis-tis-ed by the average seminary professor today, the average conservative seminary professor today.
[9:45] For centuries, people instinctively put biblical data to work in their particular circumstances. And there was a very loose and subjective approach to Bible application that really, I think, is integral to the development of Western civilization.

People would just grab stuff from God's word and apply it to their circumstances in a rather subjective way. That really was a fundamental to the development of Western civilization, whether we're talking about the United States specifically or well before that, frankly, the development of Western civilization and science and literacy and so on and so forth.

It was very common for people or for leaders of public institutions to take hold of some particular story or a mix of stories and create something that resembled their circumstances and that provided encouragement and guidance.
At least today, amongst the scholarly evangelicals, this approach has essentially disappeared. Young men going to seminary today are explicitly taught not to apply the Bible in these ways and especially not in the political and national realm.
And to be clear, there were certainly, and there certainly would be, problems with this looser approach. For instance, the three instances I cited of Exodus rising to prominence, the pilgrims, the patriots, and the slaves, I think that they all have some legitimacy.
[11:31] But during the Civil War, the South actually adopted the Exodus narrative to describe their national struggle against Northern aggression. For them, Lincoln was Pharaoh, who by preventing succession would not let his people go.

For them, Jefferson Davis or General Lee or someone like this were men in the line of Moses. So that's the problem that comes when a culture kind of instinctively appropriates Bible stories to support their particular situation.
Some of them will get it wrong and some causes which the Lord is not behind will be clothed in biblical justification. Some things that should not be done will be done in the name of the Lord.
But when we attempt to eliminate those errors by eliminating the entire exegetical approach, I'm just wondering if we're throwing the baby out with the bathwater.
Perhaps it's just better to encourage, to allow at least, or tolerate this older kind of Bible application trusting that in the end the Lord will sort out the wheat from the chaff.
[12:41] One suspicion, and this is, again, this is a podcast full of questions for me. One suspicion I have is that so many evangelical elites oppose this kind of loose theological application because they're coming from the Keller-esque winsome-centeredness project.

And there was a particular time, I remember this time, when neutral world began to shift into negative world and the new atheist types begin to make a lot of hay out of all the things done in history that were done in the name of God that appear to be, at least from first blush, unjust, sinful, and so on and so forth.
And I suspect that one possible reason that the exegesis got tightened up in some sense was because the theological thought leaders on the right overreacted to these criticisms and they just introduced a more rigid and precision-oriented exegesis that tended to gatekeep the more populist applications out of, you know, public discourse.
There was a certain moment in time, and I can't remember when this was, but I think it was in the late 90s, when there was a noticeable kind of populist movement to adopt 2 Chronicles 7.14 as a call to national repentance for Americans.
So 2 Chronicles 7.14 is, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.
[14:20] Now, to the average Christian during this time, that text had obvious relevance. They saw that their nation was in serious trouble and they wanted to encourage one another to pray and to seek God's face and turn from their wicked ways.

And if they did so, they reasoned God would heal their land. And yet, at that time, the theological precisionists immediately pushed back in various ways, chiding the populace for being overly flexible with their exegesis.
After all, this verse was spoken by God to Solomon, the king of Israel, and applying that verse to any other nation beside Israel was exegetically dubious. And, you know, strictly speaking, they were correct.
But in another sense, they were really wrong to do that. This was, this verse, after all, was, there was enough truth in that verse to be applied in the way that the populist wanted to apply it.
The kind of verse was perfect for a population of average Christians looking to God's word, trying to figure out a solution to their degenerating nation. This is my concern, that there are, there's this wider exegesis, especially when applied to public life, whether it be to, you know, justify southern slavery or to justify the fight against slavery and to justify the founding of the United States of America or to justify the pilgrims crossing the Atlantic.
[15:54] There are going, it's messy, it's messy, it's subjective. It's not necessarily even undertaken by trained theologians. These are often, you know, institutional leaders, leaders that

are, you know, accumulating power and so on and so forth.

And so it's certainly messy, but I would just argue that we probably want to note that that's what our world was built on. That, what we have now is a consequence of that.
This approach does lead to some negative outcomes. It also leads to many positive ones. And I just feel like, I think I'm just starting to wonder, whatever the liabilities that come with it, I suspect that a Christian population in a public sense is going to require this looser exegetical approach.
They're going to require that to be able to proceed in reasonable certainty that they're doing God's will, that they're going to be blessed if they obey and so on and so forth.
And I just wonder what happens if we take that away. I feel as if this is similar to Lewis's concerns about making men without chests and then requiring of them virtue and so on and so forth.
[17:14] I mean, there's some examples that I will just wrap up with that I think all the pastors I'm talking to would be familiar with. Plenty of us modern exegetes would both admire Charles Spurgeon while also routinely wincing at how messy and subjective his hermeneutics tended to be.

But you know, he really was just carrying on the same approach used by the Puritans. And that approach was looser than the approach we typically use.
It was far more, in my opinion, apostolic in nature. I would say that it was far more dependent on the subjective Holy Spirit, the subjective ministry of the Holy Spirit in illumination than we feel comfortable with.
We think, I just wonder if we're trying to prevent bad exegesis, which is, of course, an admirable thing, but what are we also cutting off if we're being overly rigid specifically in the development of public theology?
I am not arguing for a reduction of theological precision in the church, certainly not in the pulpit, but you begin to see that this stuff is just more complicated than what I think is being presented and has been presented over the last 25 years.
[18:40] I mean, another example, you know, is I was reading through, when you really start reading the Puritans, you see this stuff everywhere. I was reading through one of Edward's sermons where in the margin he wrote, I preached this same sermon on such and such a date using this other text and he had the other text referenced.

And that other text was not merely, you know, the same verse in a different gospel or the same story repeated in 1 Kings that was in 1 Chronicles or something. You know, he had preached the same sermon with a completely different text, which means that that sermon was not a strict exegesis of a particular text.
Rather, it was doctrinal or topical enough to have been able to be preached using two completely different texts. And this brings to mind, you know, in many respects the last, I thought, I think of, you know, robustly Puritan pulpit, which would be Martin Lloyd-Jones, who had a much more doctrinal approach to his exegesis.
So I'm not arguing, I'm really not arguing for anything, I don't think, but I'm not arguing for a whole cloth abandonment of current best practices related to exegesis and preaching, but I just want to suggest that as this kind of mass resourcement is happening in nearly every theological field, we might want to recognize that the exegetical approaches that built the Western world, especially in the realm of public theology, were far more subjective than the ones we're teaching professional exegetes to employ today.
So that's what I've been thinking about. I'd sure love to hear from you if you have any opinions on this. A lot of times I'll launch these sorts of conversations with my friends who are better educated than me and they'll tell me, oh yeah, there's this whole book written about that or there's a whole line of thinking about that.
[20:30] But anyway, that's all I wanted to share. I hope you have a wonderful day and love to hear back from you on your thoughts on this. skill skill Thank you.

Thank you.
Thank you.