

Proverbs-Psalms: Singing the Sounds of Real Life - Lesson 3.

Supplement Four.

Developing Old Testament Study Skills.

I. Introduction to Understanding the Old Testament.

Scripture promises the one seeking wisdom and understanding that he or she "will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Pr 2:5-6). If one really wants to properly respond to the Bible message, one must know how to interpret it. Certainly many of the spiritual truths of the Old Testament can be ascertained through just a cursory reading of the text, but systematic study can yield far greater benefits. While it is true that in-depth Bible study will take more time and effort, there are principles and methodologies that can serve as guides for making the whole process quicker, easier, and more productive.

A. Hermeneutics.

Correctly interpreting and understanding the Old Testament can be an arduous, often puzzling, but intrinsically rewarding experience. Deciding to begin doing in-depth Bible studies may seem intimidating at first, but a knowledge of the art and science of hermeneutics should prove useful. The Greek verb *hermeneuein* means "to explain, interpret" or "translate," while the noun *hermeneia* means "interpretation" or "translation." Using the verb, Luke informs his readers that Jesus "explained" to the two disciples on the Emmaus road what the Scriptures said about him (Lk 24:27). Hermeneutics attempts to help us comprehend what a message, written, oral, or visual, is endeavoring to communicate.

If the goal of hermeneutics is the correct understanding of communication, then we need to learn what precepts and methods will be appropriate to the task. Hermeneutics provides various rules and techniques for acquiring a more complete understanding of the biblical text. To avoid interpretation that is arbitrary, erroneous, or that simply suits personal whim, readers may need to appeal to rules or principles for guidance. When one consciously sets out to discover and employ such principles, one investigates hermeneutics. However, hermeneutics is both a science and an art. There are rules, principles, methods, and tactics associated with biblical interpretation, but no mechanical system of rules will ever help one fully understand all the implications or nuances of any given text; that is where the art of interpretation enters in.

Questions related to biblical hermeneutics can often be difficult to answer and there may be various ways to go about answering them; but there should be agreement on one aspect of biblical hermeneutics according to Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart: "A text cannot mean what it never meant. Or to put that in a positive way, the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken" (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982, p. 27). In other words, the interpreter must always keep in mind that the text under consideration is more than a piece of literature; it is the Word of God.

B. Exegesis.

Exegesis is a normal activity in which all of us engage on a daily basis, even if we don't call it by that name. Whenever we hear an oral statement or read a written one and seek to understand what has been said, we are engaging in exegesis. The term "exegesis" itself comes from the Greek word *exegeomai*, which basically means "to lead out of." When applied to texts, it denotes the "reading out" of the meaning. The noun, therefore, can refer to interpretation or explanation. Thus whenever we read a text or hear a statement that we seek to understand and interpret, we are involved in exegesis.

The goal of biblical exegesis is to reach an informed understanding of the text under consideration. This is different from saying that the exegete seeks to determine the meaning of the text. The fact is there are various nuances of any text's meaning and different types of exegesis can address these different aspects. For this reason, the exegete can never hope to present the exegesis of a passage as if it were the final word. Rather, one does an exegesis of a passage in which a coherent, informed interpretation is presented, based on one's encounter with and investigation of that text at a given point in time. Exegesis does not allow one to master the text so much as it enables one to enter into it.

C. Relationship of Hermeneutics to Exegesis.

According to Walter C. Kaiser in *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, the relationship between hermeneutics and exegesis is as follows: Hermeneutics seeks to describe the general and special principles and rules that are useful in approaching the biblical text. Exegesis seeks to identify the single truth-intention of individual phrases, clauses, and sentences as they make up the thoughts of paragraphs, sections, and ultimately, entire books. Accordingly, hermeneutics may be regarded as the theory that guides exegesis; exegesis may be understood to be the practice of and the set of procedures for uncovering the author's (or editor's) intended meaning (p. 47).

In other words, hermeneutics stands in the same relationship to exegesis as the rule book stands to the game. The rule book is written in terms of reflection, analysis, and experience. The game is played by concrete actualization of the rules. Rules are not the game, but the game is meaningless without rules. Hermeneutics proper is not exegesis, but exegesis is applied hermeneutics.

II. Biblical Interpretation.

Interpretation is an activity in which a reader or hearer seeks to gain the shareable verbal meanings that an author or speaker has sought to transmit by linguistic signs. Not every meaning in an author's mind can be conveyed by language. As E. D. Hirsch has put it, "An author's verbal meaning is limited by linguistic possibilities but is determined by his actualizing and specifying some of those possibilities. Correspondingly, the verbal meaning that an interpreter construes is determined by his act of will, limited by those same possibilities" (Hirsch, p. 47).

The chance that an interpreter will succeed in grasping an author's verbal meaning is greatly enhanced by the limitations of possible meanings that have been imposed upon words by cultural norms and conventions. A linguistic symbol can represent an identical meaning for two persons because the range of what it can mean has been limited by convention. Of course, words often have several meanings, but the association a word has with other words in its context does much to indicate the unambiguous meaning that the author intended it to have at a certain place in his or her writing. Nevertheless, the interpreter always has to keep in mind there is some degree of speculation associated with the meaning of the communication he or she wants to grasp. In constructing a text whose author cannot be consulted, a claim to validity in interpretation can never have more than a high degree of probability.

Yet the more willing an interpreter is to submit the proposed construction of a text to the scrutiny of others who have also worked hard to understand it, the higher will be the probability of achieving a consensus regarding the meaning its author wanted to transmit. The greatest difficulty to overcome in the interpretation of texts is the famous "hermeneutical circle," which refers to the path a thought takes as it attempts to find meaning.

Methodologically, it refers to the procedure that an interpreter follows as he or she turns from the parts of a sentence to the sentence as a whole and then, quite literally, from the whole back to the parts. Descriptively, the circle refers to that profound interrelationship that the words of a sentence have with the paragraph as a whole, and so on outward to the work as a unity, and then finally expanding to include all the elements contingent upon an adequate understanding of the text at hand, in short, the interrelationship of text and context, context and text.

To be sure, if all facets of a text were equally capable of being made into "evidence" to support several different ways of construing a text, then the hermeneutical circle could never be broken, and interpreters would waste their time discussing which view was correct. But as Hirsch points out, ". . . not all traits are genre-dependent . . . and not everything in verbal understanding is variable. Understanding is difficult, but not impossible" (p. 77). So discussion with a fellow interpreter about how a text should be construed is indispensable, precisely because another mind is able to bring one to see some of those relatively few invariable traits in a text that will fit only one interpretation of it. Therefore, validity in interpretation is possible as a matter of high probability, albeit not absolute certainty, and this makes the interpretation of biblical texts as worthy a pursuit of knowledge as that of any other field where only high probability, rather than absolute certainty, is attainable.

III. Procedures of Interpretation.

The exegetical method of research is the process by which a text is systematically explained. The text itself is regarded as a concrete expression from "sender" to "receiver." Since the sender and receiver are both now absent, the exegete must attempt to reconstruct this relationship through the text alone.

Any historical investigation into the meaning of a text must necessarily involve several tasks. The first task of the exegete is to examine the content of the text under investigation. The exegete must determine what the writer said by investigating: (a) The actual words of the author (textual criticism), (b) the meaning of those words (lexical data), and (c) the relation of those words to each other (grammar/syntax).

Then the exegete must try to determine why the writer said what he or she said. This includes: (a) examining the literary context; i.e., why he or she stated it where he or she did in the passage, and (b) the historical context; i.e., understanding the words in light of the background and culture of the author and his or her audience. In summary, by being sensitive to the meaning of the words of a passage or book in the context of its literary and historical setting, the exegete can attempt to recover the original message of the author.

Literary context is what most people mean when they talk about reading something in its context. Essentially, literary context means that words only have meaning in sentences, and for the most part biblical sentences only have meaning in relation to preceding and succeeding sentences. This means it is extremely important to determine the genre of the literature under consideration. In contemporary literature, biography will be read differently from mystery and drama differently from limerick. The type of literature affects how that writing will be approached and interpreted. This applies equally to the Old Testament. Prophecy is a different genre from proverbial literature. The interpreter must identify the genre of what he or she is trying to interpret and discover as much as possible about that genre. This latter endeavor is approached through a wide variety of critical methodologies, which will be surveyed later on in this lesson.

The historical context, which will differ from book to book, has to do with several things: the time and culture of the author and his or her readers, that is, the geographic, topographical, and political factors that are relevant to the author's setting, and the occasion of the book, letter, psalm, prophetic oracle, or other genre. The most important question of historical context, however, has to do with the occasion and purpose of each biblical book and/or of its various parts. Here one wants to have an idea of what was going on in Israel that called forth such a document, or what the situation of the author was that caused him to write it. Again, this will vary from book to book, but can usually be found (when it can be found) within the book itself.

IV. Critical Methodologies.

In the balance of this lesson, we will be discussing the various ways of addressing the questions and problems modern students and interpreters encounter when exegeting the biblical text. The variety of methods to be discussed merely attests to the richness and diversity of the biblical documents, and these methods should be seen as complementary. No single way of approaching a text should be seen as exhausting the meaning of a passage, but rather as a way of dealing with one particular facet of a passage.

Each of these approaches is treated as a type of "criticism." Criticism is a comprehensive term, embodying a number of techniques employed in the study of (among other things) written documents in order to establish, as far as possible, their original text, the literary categories to which they pertain, style, authorship, date, purpose, and so forth. Biblical criticism embraces various critical disciplines, notably textual criticism, literary criticism, form criticism, rhetorical criticism, redaction criticism, historical criticism, structural analysis, and canonical criticism.

A. Textual Criticism.

The function of textual criticism is the restoration of the original wording of a document when alterations have been introduced (deliberately or inadvertently) in the course of copying and recopying the document by hand through the centuries. If the biblical autograph or original document was still available, scribal errors could be corrected by reference to it. But as the biblical autographs have long since disappeared, and the surviving copies differ from one another here and there, the original wording may be determined only by a careful comparative study of the copies. The main types of scribal errors have to do with accidental errors of the eye and ear, and have been categorized as follows:

1. Confusion of Similar Letters. A frequent cause of variant reading in Old Testament manuscripts and versions is the existence of several Hebrew letters of similar appearance. Here distinction has to be made between the archaic Canaanite script used in preexilic times and the later Aramaic square script. Evidence shows that the letters most susceptible to confusion in the Old Testament transmission history were resh/dalet, he/heth, and waw/yod, though other letters such as beth/kaph, were also misread.
2. Transposition of Letters. This scribal error, technically known as "metathesis", sometimes produces awkward readings as in Psalm 49:11, where the traditional text has "their inward thoughts;" the Septuagint, Peshitta, Targum, and Vulgate, however, all presume the reading "their tombs," which fits the context much better and is normally adopted by modern commentaries and translations (RSV, NEB, JB, NIV).
3. Incorrect Word Division. In manuscripts of continuous script, it is understandable that words can sometimes be divided differently to yield conflicting readings. This is apparently what happened in Jeremiah 23:33, where the Masoretic text reads "what burden" but the Septuagint and Vulgate have divided the words as "you are the burden."
4. Haplography. This is the name of an error in manuscript copying in which a syllable, word, or line is omitted by accidental oversight because of the identity or similarity of adjacent material (opposite of dittography).
5. Dittography. This is the phenomenon of writing twice what should only have been written once. It is the opposite of haplography. A dittograph is an example of erroneous repetition.

6. Confusion of Similar-sounding Words. In addition to the errors of the eye (ocular), other mistakes are best explained as errors of the ear (aural). Two words particularly vulnerable to this kind of confusion were the Hebrew words *lo'*, "not," and *lo*, "his/its."

7. Deliberate Scribal Intervention. Sometimes there was a deliberate alteration of the text for purposes of clarification, correction, and apologetic.

Once the interpreter has reached a decision about the wording of the passage under consideration, another set of questions arise that has to do with the literary context of the passage. This encompasses the field of literary criticism.

B. Literary Criticism.

Literary criticism is a term that means different things to different people. However, it has three major definitions according to its historical, technical, and contemporary usage. It may refer either to (1) a particular approach to the analysis of Scripture that appeared in systematic form in the nineteenth century (often called source criticism) and which, considerably refined, is still practiced today (2) that investigation of a text that seeks to explicate the intention of the author through a detailed analysis of the component elements and structure of the text itself; or, quite broadly, to (3) any undertaking which attempts to understand biblical literature simply as literature, often in a manner paralleling the interests and methods of contemporary literary critics.

Such matters as the location of the passage within a larger literary unit and how it functions within this larger unit are often crucial in interpreting a passage. Since most of the biblical documents were originally written to be read aloud, this becomes a most important consideration, for this required ancient authors to be intentional and careful in how they composed and structured documents.

C. Form Criticism.

If literary criticism deals with how the passage relates to its larger literary unit, form criticism is more narrowly concerned with the passage itself. The father of form criticism was Hermann Gunkel, a German Old Testament scholar best known for his study of the Psalms. Form criticism seeks to recover the shorter oral compositions from which the Bible's written sources supposedly derived. The Bible contains a rich diversity of literary forms and genres and many of these already existed prior to their actual appearance in the biblical text. For this reason, questions of the original setting of particular literary forms and genres are also crucial as one attempts to determine the "life situation" of a passage. Thus, Gunkel and his disciples claimed that the original setting of most of the psalms was the temple in Jerusalem.

Eventually, Old Testament form criticism began to focus more on the literary types of the present written text rather than on the Bible's oral pre-stages, with special attention being given to the literary form or genre of the passage, a parable, a prophetic oracle, a hymn, and so forth. Attention to these questions has arisen because of the recognition that form and the meaning are directly related; one reads a poem one way, a piece of prose another.

D. Rhetorical Criticism.

Rhetorical criticism is a term adopted in 1968 by the late Old Testament scholar James Muilenburg to denote a methodological approach to Scripture designed to supplement that of form criticism. Its task, he suggested, is to exhibit the structural patterns employed in the fashioning of a literary unit, whether prose or poetry, and to discern the various devices (such as parallelism, anaphora, etc.) by which the predications of the composition were formulated and ordered into a united whole ("Form Criticism and Beyond," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 88 [March 1969], pp. 1-18). Questions of composition and structure are also dealt with here, as well as questions relating to the rhetorical style and mood of the passage.

E. Redaction Criticism.

Redaction criticism is best defined as the attempt to lay bare the theological perspectives of a biblical writer by analyzing the editorial (redactional) and compositional techniques and interpretations employed in shaping and framing the written and/or oral traditions at hand (see Luke 1:1-4). As used in biblical exegesis, redaction criticism refers to that stage of interpretation whose primary focus is the final written form or composition of a passage. It pertains to the final stage of the tradition, as it were, that has become crystallized in written form and asks what the author or final editor intended to say through the passage in its final form. Redaction criticism presupposes the insights and perspectives of textual criticism and form criticism.

Both redaction criticism and canonical criticism, by calling special attention to the final literary form of the biblical text, provide useful perspectives for the interpreter interested in the theological message of the biblical writings or the final canonical viewpoint as it has come to be expressed and formulated by the author or editor.

F. Historical Criticism.

Historical criticism, when narrowly defined, deals with the historical setting of a document: the time and place in which it was written; its sources, if any; the events, dates, persons, and places mentioned or implied in the text; etc. Its goal is the writing of a chronological narrative of pertinent events, revealing where possible the nature and interconnection of the events themselves. The historical criticism of documents proceeds on the basis of two related assumptions or perspectives. These may be designated as the internal and external historical aspects of a document. The internal historical aspects of a document are related to the historical and cultural dimensions described or depicted in the texts. The external historical aspects of a document are related to the historical, cultural, and biographical context in which the document was produced.

G. Structural Analysis.

Structural analysis is a method of analyzing data that arose in several disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, most notably anthropology, sociology, and linguistics, as well as in the study of literature. Its name derives from its analysis of "deep structures" inherent in human cultures and language that remain constant despite immense diversity of "surface structures." In literature, "deep structures" refer to the underlying functions, motives, and

interactions among the main characters and objects in a narrative, and, most notably, the types of oppositions and their resolutions that develop as the text unfolds. "Surface structures" include plot, theme, motifs, and characterization; or in poetry, meter, rhyme, parallelism, and so on. Structural analysis deliberately ignores the historical background of a text and instead seeks to show universally recurring features in narratives from all cultures and eras. These features reveal a text's most fundamental meaning, irrespective of its author's conscious intention. In other words, for structuralists meaning resides not in the largely irrecoverable mental processes of a text's human author but in the actual words of the text itself.

H. Canonical Criticism.

James A. Sanders coined the term "canonical criticism" (Torah and Canon, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972) to denote a method of biblical criticism that operates subsequent to form and redaction criticism and seeks to determine the function of biblical texts in their historical contexts and investigates the nature of their authority. The essence of canonical criticism, as practiced by Sanders, lies in discerning the hermeneutics by which the ancient traditions were adapted for use in new contexts.

The term "canonical criticism" is also frequently applied to the approach to interpretation advocated by Brevard Childs (Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979). With Sanders, Childs shares a broad definition of canon, a concern for the theological significance of the biblical texts, and a concern for the function of the biblical texts within the community of faith that preserved and treasured them. Contrary to Sanders, Childs does not seek to determine the hermeneutics employed in the canonical process. Rather, the stance developed by Childs focuses on the shape and function of the final canonical text. According to Childs, this final shape is of special significance because (1) it alone displays the full history of revelation witnessed to by Scripture; (2) in it the community has exercised its critical judgment on the received traditions and modified them accordingly; and (3) by showing how the texts were actualized by generations removed from the original event and composition of the writings, the canonical shape may provide a hermeneutical key as to how we may actualize the text in our day.

V. Conclusion: Analysis and Synthesis.

The exegetical task may be said to fall into two fairly well-defined stages: analysis and synthesis. As the interpreter begins the task of exegesis, examining different aspects of the passage, whether they are literary, rhetorical, historical or whatever, will serve as a way of "breaking down" the passage into its component parts and problems and examining them as discrete units and issues. These separate analytic tasks will normally overlap, for each will inform the other.

As analysis takes place, the interpreter's understanding of the passage will gradually increase and the groundwork will be laid for synthesis. Synthesis, here, means the process by which the interpreter again "puts together" the text. The task is now to relate the preliminary analytical investigations to each other, weighing the significance of each, and deciding how each one will contribute to the overall interpretation of the text at hand.