

## Interpreting Old Testament Texts for Preaching — Ten Easy Steps

### 1. *Translation and translations.*

Whenever possible translate the Hebrew text at the hand of a lexicon and a reference grammar. Short cut: Match up the Hebrew with a good literal translation (e.g. RSV) so that you get some kind of feel for the original. Compare several translations, watching out for divergent emphases and shifts in meaning. Which translation would be most clear for oral use? Suggestions: RSV, KJV, NEB, JB, NAB (New American Bible), TEV. At this stage you should decide what features of the text will require special study or will offer the most usable data for a sermon.

### 2. *Textual criticism.*

This step may often be omitted in homiletical preparation. Commentaries will usually call attention to the



most serious variant readings. (What special questions might be raised by the apparatus at Jer. 33:14-16, which indicates that this Old Testament lesson for Advent I in Series C is not in the Septuagint?)

### 3. Introduction.

As time permits you may want to read an introduction to the book (Fohrer, Kaiser, Eissfeldt), or the somewhat shorter articles in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (IDB)*. This can serve to review your previously acquired knowledge of the purpose, structure or historical setting of the book. It will also help you grow in greater understanding of the Scriptures in general. Sermon preparation provides an excellent opportunity for pastors to maintain their exegetical skills.

### 4. Word Study.

Watch for words of special theological significance. Often whole paragraphs, or even sermons, can be built on a good word study. Ways to proceed: a) Look up the word in Brown, Driver, Briggs (BDB) and see how its various shades of meanings are classified b) Read an article about the word in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the NT* (which always includes a section on how the word is used in LXX and often in the Hebrew Bible), in the new *Theological Dictionary of the OT*, (Volumes I and II are now available,) or in IDB.

c) Use a Hebrew and/or an English concordance. Hebrew = Lisowsky or BDB as in "a" above; English = Young's Analytical Concordance.

### 5. Form Criticism.

Begin by classifying into poetry/prose or literal/figurative. Make an outline of the text to determine its structure. Does the assigned pericope correspond to the natural divisions of the text? Should it be shorter? longer? A good commentary will help with the more sophisticated aspects of form criticism. Such analysis may help you to understand how the pericope was originally used, it may clarify the meaning of the whole pericope or its parts, it may point to matters of theological importance (note how "expressions of trust" or "recitals of God's goodness" accompany "peti-

tions" in the Psalms). Watch for the *Interpreter's Dictionary of Form Criticism*, which will be published in 2-3 years.

### 6. Traditions or concepts employed or presupposed by author.

Use of IDB, a commentary, a biblical theology (Von Rad, Eichrodt), or de Vaux's *Ancient Israel* can be very helpful here. If a passage deals with the Exodus, covenant, servant, messiah, sacrificial system, etc. you may want to investigate the history of this concept and its implications for an Israelite. Often substantive theological points, or at least matters of interest and enrichment, can be investigated through IDB (passover ceremonies, animals and plants, matters of geography, history, etc.).

### 7. Redaction analysis.

This is a crucial step. How did the original author use or modify the materials and traditions of Israel so that they applied to his specific situation? Thus the way in which Isaiah uses the Messianic hope is different from the use by Ezekiel. What was the author driving at in this passage?

### 8. A commentary.

After doing all or part of the first seven steps you are ready to use a commentary or other aid. Try:

a) *Proclamation* (a series of 8 booklets published each year by Fortress Press) or *Preaching Helps*.

b) a one volume commentary (Jerome, Peake's, Interpreter's)

c) a major commentary on the book in question. Your personal library should have volumes on the most widely used books of the Old and New Testaments. The commentary will often cover points examined in #1-7 or raise entirely new issues. A list of recommended commentaries on the Old Testament will be published in the February, 1976, issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission*.

### 9. Diagnosis/malady.

What theological diagnosis of his situation does the author offer? Watch both for symptoms and underlying causes. How appropriate is this diagnosis for your audience today? How must it be modified?

10. *Prognosis/means.*

How does the text necessitate Christ and/or how is its proclamation of God's goodness in continuity with the Christian faith? On the basis of this raw material, you can construct the goal for your sermon, perhaps deter-

mine the central parts of the outline, or construct illustrations or applications. From here on out, you can use standard homiletical procedures which you have acquired previously. Don't forget to check the Epistle and Gospel for the day!

