

PREACHING CHRIST
LECTURE 3
INTERROGATION: QUESTIONING A TEXT

INTRODUCTION

Once you have selected your text the next step is to question it – ask of it questions which will help you arrive at its meaning. This lecture will propose a series of questions to ask of your text

1. Is your text in the Old Testament or the New Testament?

This is an important question to ask, because the meaning of words and concepts may vary depending on whether the text is under the “Old Covenant” or under the “New Covenant” dispensation.

Example: The ceremonial laws requiring various sacrifices under the “Old Covenant” have been abolished by the final and full sacrifice of Jesus Christ under the “New Covenant.” So, any sermon on these laws would have to emphasise their practical abolition, but also their continued theological significance.

2. What book does your verse appear in?

If the previous question will help you place your text in its covenantal context, this question will help you set it in its canonical context. By identifying the book’s place in God’s progressive revelation of himself, you will more safely arrive at its original meaning and avoid importing later revelations of God into your interpretation.

Example: While God’s use of the plural “let us make” in Genesis 1 allows for the later doctrine of the trinity, it is not certain that the original readers interpreted this as a plurality of persons in the Godhead. It is only later, when God had established monotheism in His people that it was safe to reveal that that one God was three persons.

3. What is the historical background?

By identifying when the events of the text took place, you will be able to refer to other passages of Scripture which bear upon that time. You will also be able to discover if there are any significant links with events which came before or after. It is important to work on educating your congregation in biblical chronology.

In connection with this, Douglas Stuart wrote: “Most churchgoers know few dates. They usually aren’t sure whether Esther comes before or after Abraham, or in what century to locate any of them. The more often you take the time to explain the dates related to a passage (it need not take very long, after all), the more clear the interrelationships of people, books, and events will become to your congregation. God’s revelation to us is a historical one – do not neglect chronology.”¹

Example: Further light can be shed on Ezra and Nehemiah when you discover that the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi were ministering during the same period.

¹ Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 75.

4. What is the geographical setting?

A spatial awareness of where each biblical nation and region are located will help you understand the various threats and alliances which Israel passed through. An ability to describe the terrain and physical features of an area will help listeners to paint the picture of the setting in their own minds. You will want to have a good set of Biblical maps to refer to. Douglas Stuart commented: "Many preachers report that the results of this part of the process especially produce the sorts of remarks in a sermon that cause members of a congregation to say that they felt like they were 'right there,' i.e., able to imagine themselves in something of the same relationship to the biblical material that the original audience presumably was."²

Example: Describing the geographical cul-de-sac – mountains, desert, sea – which Israel ended up in at the Red Sea underlines the humanly impossible situation they were in.

5. What kind of literature is it?

The nature of the literature will affect the nature of your interpretation. Different literary categories are prose, song, wisdom, apocalyptic, biography, narrative, prophecy, legal code, etc.

Example: If you are preaching from Daniel, you will interpret the historical narrative sections in a way quite different from the apocalyptic, or visionary parts.

6. Are there any cultural references?

By identifying practices unique to Israelite culture you will avoid making wrong applications of culturally specific practices to other cultures. Use a Bible dictionary or Encyclopaedia here.

Example: The necessity of building a fence around the roof of one's home was only relevant to a flat-roofed culture in which the roof was often used for practical and social reasons. However, note that there is a transferable principle of taking responsibility for other's safety while on our property which is not culturally bound

7. What doctrines are involved?

The highlighting of certain explicit or implicit doctrines will alert you to the need for studying these particular doctrines to discover their importance and consequences in your text.

Example: "And he [Abraham] believed in the LORD and it was counted to him for righteousness" (Gen.15:6). This verse would require you to consider the doctrine of justification by faith and imputed righteousness.

8. Are there any cross-references?

From your knowledge of Scripture you should know if it is quoted, alluded to, interpreted or developed in other parts of Scripture. You will also want to use a thorough cross-reference resource like the Thomson Chain Reference Bible.

Example: If you take Genesis 16:6 again you will find that it is referred to in Romans 4, Galatians 3, and James 2.

² Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 75.

9. How is your text connected with the surrounding verses, chapters, or even books?

There are certain connecting words to look out for: “and, therefore, however, but, nevertheless, then, etc.” This should highlight the need to connect your text with what goes before or after.

Example: Notice the connections between the various books of the Pentateuch. Also, notice that the ten commandments are preceded with a statement of redemption (Ex.20:2), and concluded with a reference to sacrifice. Making these connections will prevent you preaching legalistic sermons on the commandments.

10. Is there selectivity?

Some books repeat what is told in other books. However, they usually present the same events in a different way. The writer is inspired to select the facts which will best serve his overall purpose. By understanding this selectivity you will gain clues to the overall purpose of the writer.

Example: The books of Kings and Chronicles cover many of the same events. However, Kings was written before the Babylonian captivity and highlights the sins of the kings which caused the captivity. Chronicles was written after the nation had been taken captive to Babylon and presents the line of David in a more positive light in order to re-ignite hope of a restoration of the Davidic kingdom and the Messianic hope.

11. Who is the author?

Sometimes this is not explicitly stated. However, even if the name cannot be stated with 100% certainty, the character of the author will often shine through. Douglas Stuart wrote: “To a listener, a passage of Scripture often seems more ‘real’ if its author has been identified and the general character of his writing has been described just a bit.”³

Example: When preaching from the Psalms written by David, it is helpful to try and relate the sentiments in the Psalm to David’s character and life.

12. When was it written?

This may be different from the answer to the question regarding when did the events narrated take place. The text or the book may yield clues to when it was written. Knowledge of who wrote, when he wrote, and to whom he wrote may have an impact on what events in the history were highlighted and why.

Example: Genesis was written by Moses which means that it was written many years after the events narrated in the book. It appears that Moses was using Israel’s ancient history to guide the nation regarding its present duty to leave Egypt behind and press on into the Promised Land.

13. What are the main words in the text?

You should make a list of all the important verbs, nouns and adjectives. This will help in performing word studies and also in structuring your sermon. Notice especially if any words are used repeatedly.

³ Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 74.

Example: “In those days, and in that time, saith the LORD, the children of Israel shall come, they and the children of Judah together, going and weeping: they shall go, and seek the Lord” (Jer.50:4). The key verbs here are underlined and may also provide your sermon headings.

14. What are the most important places or personalities?

Again this can prove a suitable source of further research and also of sermon headings.

Example: A sermon on Genesis 16 might look at events from four different perspectives based on the main personalities: Abram, Sarai, Hagar, and Ishmael.

15. How do other versions translate the text?

Obviously it is best if you can study the Scriptures in the original languages. However, if you can't, and even if you can, you will often get light on your text by comparing how other versions translate it.

Example: Notice the extra light which the NKJV throws on the underlined phrase below.

“For thou preventest him with the blessings of goodness: thou settest a crown of pure gold on his head” (Ps.21:3 KJV)

“For You meet him with the blessings of goodness; You set a crown of pure gold upon his head” (Ps.21:3 NKJV)

16. How is the text structured?

This is especially relevant if you are considering more than one verse. If it is a narrative, is there a beginning, middle, and end? If it is a Psalm, does the Psalmist move from despair to hope, or from praise to practice? If it is a proverb, is there evidence of parallel statements – the same truth expressed twice though in different ways.

Example: Look at the structure of Psalm 57. There is a cry to God for help (v1-5), a report of deliverance (v6), then praise to God for his help (v7-11).

17. What are the applications in the area of faith or action?

Who is the text speaking to – Christians or unbelievers, young or old, male or female, rich or poor, successful or failing, Jew or Gentile. Is there a doctrine to be believed or a duty to be performed? Is there an obvious command or exhortation? Is there a rebuke or a consolation to be administered?

Example: Psalm 57 is a suitable model of faith and practice for those in trouble.

18. Is there anything controversial in the text?

There may be something in the text which Christians have disagreed upon. You should attempt to understand each view's strengths and weaknesses and defend the view you support.

Example: The prophecies of Ezekiel 40-48 regarding a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem have been taken literally by some Christians and symbolically by others.

19. What do commentators say?

You should build up a resource of reliable commentators on the text. As our financial resources are limited, you will be best to start with reliable practical commentaries on the whole Bible like Matthew Henry, Matthew Poole, Jamieson, Faucett and Brown, etc. It is good to read the mature conclusions of others in order to check our own conclusions.

Example: You may want to consult a commentary if you are uncertain as to how to apply the text to your hearers. Matthew Henry and Arthur Pink are masters of this art.

20. What is central and what is peripheral?

Learn to distinguish between what is of primary and what is of secondary importance in a text. You cannot say everything possible about every text in every sermon. Neither would you want to. Major on the majors and minor on the minors.

Example: When preaching on the Red Sea crossing don't get diverted by all the speculation about what and where the Red Sea actually was. The most important point is the divine miracle of the crossing.

Application

Learn to interrogate your text with patience, submission and a listening ear. Collate your answers and meditate upon them. Pray for light on unanswered questions.