

Principles for Old Testament Exegetes

(“Hey, I’m an Epistles Kind of Guy! So How do I get an Expository Sermon out of an Old Testament Text?”)

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Introduction:

Having established the importance of preaching expository messages from Old Testament texts to New Testament believers, how does one go about preparing such messages?

This question is obviously broad enough to warrant an answer developed along several lines of thinking. For example, there are specific issues that must be addressed when preaching from certain sections of the Pentateuch that are different from the issues one faces when preparing a message from the Psalter or from Wisdom literature.

However, there are a number of preliminary considerations that will help the expositor prepare accurate expositions from passages throughout the different kinds of material presented throughout the Old Testament.

Someone has identified the “Golden Rule of Biblical Interpretation” as follows:

When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages (*distant context*) and axiomatic (*hermeneutics*) and fundamental truths (*theological context*), indicate clearly otherwise.

I. General Hermeneutical Considerations

- A. Identify and distinguish the nature/category of the material in view.
- B. Identify and distinguish which Person(s) of the Godhead are in view.
- C. Distinguish the covenants God established with Israel.
- D. Allow context to determine and govern meaning.

Illustration: Who is the “king” in Psalm 2?

1. Is this David?

2 Sam 7:14 – “I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me.”

2 Sam 10 – David attacked by Hunan the Ammonite in league with the Arameans who surrounded them (10:9)

2. Is this Solomon?

1 Chron 17:13-14 -- God’s promise to set up one of David’s descendants who would be one of David’s sons who would build God a house and I will be his father and he will be My son.

1 Chron 22:9-10 – Indicates that God would give Solomon victory from all his enemies on every side.

3. Is this Messiah?

Note the contextual clues:

- a. This psalm is portraying a broad based spiritual and political rebellion and conspiracy against Yahweh and His “anointed” (vv 1-2).
- b. The wrath of God against these earthly rulers is associated with the enthronement of this King (v. 4-6).
- c. Universal dominion and judgment has been given by Yahweh to this king and the nations are his inheritance (vv 7-9).
- d. Warnings are issued to the kings of the earth to render careful and reverential worship to the Lord AND to His Son (vv 10-12)
- e. Spiritual blessing are assured to those who put their trust and confidence in this King (v 12)

Concluding Question: Are any of these facts possible with regard to any historical king of Israel who reigned in Jerusalem up to the time of the Captivity?

- E. Look for key or leading terms (Leitwort) and repeated phrases within the passage.

Illustration: The term “see” or “see to it” in Gen 22 reveals the orientation and the key idea in Genesis 22.

1. Abraham “saw” the mountain (v. 4)
2. Abraham told Isaac that God would provide or “see to it” (v. 8)
3. Abraham saw the ram in the thicket (v. 13)
4. Abraham called the place after the “God who sees to it” (v. 14)

- F. Pay attention to structural clues

1. The movement and flow of the text is often introduced by a shift in place, time, or circumstances.

The phrase “after these things” is often the clue given to you in the text by the author to signal the beginning or the ending of a unit.

2. The placement of a narrative within the context or flow of a larger block of material often is a clue to the author’s bigger message for the original audience.

I Samuel and parts of 2 Samuel have as their larger purpose the defense of God’s rejection of Saul and the stripping away of His kingship and God’s selection of David and the permanent establishment of His dynasty.

- a. Though his outer appearance was appealing, Saul’s inner character was sadly deficient. His repeated acts of rebellion against God eventually resulted in the removal of His kingdom before God removed him from the throne. (1 Samuel 10-15).
- b. I Samuel 16 describes the one God selected as someone who to the eye of the beholder was very different than Saul. But, this passage reveals that God sees differently than we see! (16:7)
- c. Chapter 17 is the vindication of God’s choice in showing the difference between the heart and faith of David and that of Saul.

Note: Look at the supplemental sermon on 1 Samuel 16:1-7 as well as the exegetical analysis of that passage.

- G. Assume the Author of the larger block of material has a big idea that He is attempting to communicate to his readers and that idea has been placed in his heart by God who has given him the ability to articulate it in such a way that it plays into the Divine design of the Testament and ultimately the entire Bible.

1. God's Divine Design – to reveal Himself fully and finally through a Son (Heb 1:1-3)
2. God Revealed this Son in the NT (Matthew 1:1) but for 39 books He had Promised this Son in the OT (Gen 3:15)
3. Every major part of the OT is strategically designed to accomplish God's bigger purpose – to prepare for the coming of His full and final revelation.
4. So, in the first testament, God spoke in many ways, at different times, to different men.
5. Those ways can be arranged in large blocks that each communicate something about this coming revelation.
 - Pentateuch – he will be a perfect priest who will offer a permanent sacrifice.
 - Historical Books – he will be a perfect king and God will “see to it” that this King comes to the throne. And when he does come to the throne, He will cause others to live obediently in the sight of the One who “sees.”
 - Wisdom Literature – reveals the description of the life, values, ethical and moral character, and the suffering of this coming Son.
 - Prophets – reveal His determination to bring God's people back into conformity with the ethical and moral obligations they have as God's people so that they might again enjoy the blessing of God as His chosen people and that they might rejoice in God's righteous judgment over their enemies.
6. Sometimes a specific author can arrange his material so that it communicates a larger message.

Illustration: Moses and the theological value of the Pentateuch

- The original audience of the Pentateuch is a specific group of people who are about to inherit the fulfillment of a promise God made to their ancestor Abraham.
- The immediate purpose of the Pentateuch is to equip this nation to live obediently for a long time in the land God is giving to them.
- The story line advances through a 40 year journey that is detailed for you in parts of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It is the story of two generations – one that failed to enter into the land because of unbelief and the other that entered because of God's grace.

- Everything else in the Pentateuch is structured to explain this story to the original readers as well as to the subsequent readers.

Genesis explains the origins of this nation and introduces them to the purpose God has for them as well as to the promise God made to their ancestor Abraham. And, that promise exceeded just the reversal of the curse for one nation – it involved a plan God had to restore blessing to all 70 of the nations mentioned in Genesis 10. This plan would be accomplished through His choosing and equipping one of those nations to be His special possession and through whom He would mediate the restoration of His blessing.

Exodus explains the unfortunate circumstances into which this chosen nation had fallen and God's subsequent deliverance of them from the hand of the mightiest ruler of all the nations of that day, Pharaoh. Not only does Exodus introduce the reader to a renewed understanding of God's greatness, God's holiness, and God's power, it also reveals God's personal interest in this nation and His desire for them to worship Him acceptably and accurately. So, in order to accomplish these purposes, God redeems this nation from the hand of their oppressor and then enters into a covenant with them. A covenant which they promptly disobeyed and consequently were in danger of God's wrath.

In order to remove His wrath and restore His people to His covenant, God introduces a code which consists of laws and sacrifices. The intent of this code (priestly code and the holiness code) is to preserve and protect Israel from her propensity to disregard her covenant obligations and to disobey the commandments and instructions of Yahweh.

Leviticus is the presentation and explanation of these codes.

- a). Covenant established along with stipulation (Ex 19-25) to which the people agree.
- b). Covenant violation in the idolatry of the golden calf led by the priests (Ex 31).
- c). Covenant renewed (Ex 33-34) and a priestly code established to keep the priests from doing something like this again (Ex 35-Lev 16).
- d). Covenant violation by the people in the matter of the goat idols (Lev 17:1-9).

- e). A holiness code imposed for the protect of the people to keep them from future idolatry and acts of disobedience to God (Lev 17-25).
- f). Covenant renewed (Lev 26)

Numbers records the failure of the first generation to experience God’s intended blessing because of unbelief. This book also records God’s faithfulness to Abraham in the raising up of a new generation that will in fact inherit the promises.

Deuteronomy is the establishment of this new generation in the covenant God made with the first generation that perished. But, this time around, God gives instruction that is designed to help them remain in the land for a “long time” instead of perishing quickly like their fathers did in the 40 year journey.

- 7. Sometimes an Author will use literary devices to connect his readers to larger theological themes God is leading him to stress to the readers.
 - a) The centrality, importance, and power of God’s Word in Genesis, in the Pentateuch, and in the rest of the OT.

It is not a mistake that the ten commandments are called the ten words and this Mosaic law becomes the foundation for the rest of the OT.
 - b) The importance, provision, and instruction for rendering proper worship as a God-given priority for life.

Foreshadowed in the Garden of Eden.
 - c) The contrast between belief and unbelief is a matter of the heart and not of the law.

Moses contrasts himself with Abraham to stress the importance of faith versus works of law. Abraham, who lived before the Law is portrayed as one who kept the law (Gen 26:5) and Moses, who was given the Law and lived under its instruction is portrayed as one who did not enter in because he did not believe (Numbers 20:12). In this way, Moses is foreshadowing the limitation of the Law and its powerlessness as a means of entering into God’s rest. That way would come through the kind of faith modeled by one who lived before the Law and to whom the promise had been given – Abraham.

Furthermore, in the arrangement of this contrast, Moses stresses that unbelief is in essence rebellion against God who has spoken “words” which must be given central place in the life and consideration of His people (Num 20:24).

All of this would prove to be the repeated story of God’s people living under the Law given through Moses. But, there would be in their midst, those who exercised the faith of Abraham and would evidence the possession of such faith by obedient living (Hab 2:4) and would live before God as His righteous people.

These people would be consistently marked by two things:

1. A passionate and committed love for God as seen by their love for and obedience to God’s Word.
2. A reverential fear of God that expressed itself in accurate, acceptable worship on the one hand and in obedient daily living on the other.

II. Specific Literary Considerations

A. Understand the Origin and Intent of Language

Origin of all language is God

General and necessary intent of all language is intelligible communication

Specific and theological intent of all language is Divine intelligible communication

B. Understand the Nature and Design of Language

Communication can be grouped into five major categories:

1. Language that is used to inform people of something they don’t know and need to know.
2. Language that is used imperatively to command or prescribe action, behavior, or thought.
3. Language that is used instructively to give greater insight into something or about somebody.
4. Language that is used to perform something – i.e. a promise is a linguistic action that procures a commitment and moves a person into a dynamic relationship based on self-declared obligation.
5. Language that is used in a celebratory or participatory way either to praise or to lament privately (the person and God) or corporately (the person with other persons and the community with God)

C. Understand the Structure and Forms of Language

God communicated His message to His people through His prophets in many different ways and by many different means over an extended period of time (Heb 1:1-3). A simple glance through the Old Testament quickly verifies that this is in fact how God chose to do this. He did so because He determined that this variety was the best possible way to communicate the revelation He desired His people to know.

1. The Structure – Language in the Bible (and in all communication) is structured along three basic lines consisting of:
 - a) Form – what it looks like and the shape it takes. Genealogies have a different shape and come in different forms than psalms and proverbs.
 - b) Content – the information that is contained and communicated in and by the form.
 - c) Function – what this information and the form itself is intended to do or produce in the recipient.

2. The Forms – genres

- a) Narrative (Prose)

This is the basic fundamental form of communication in the Old Testament. Its **form** is most often scenes or stories revolving around characters and plot. Its **content** consists of the words, actions, thoughts, and consequences occurring to the characters in the story. Its primary **function** is to advance the story line of the Bible and to communicate key theological truth in the process of doing so. Historical narrative is often seen as a more specific kind of narrative that focuses primarily on the history of Israel's relationship to God.

- b) Law (legal portions of the Old Testament, covenants, law codes, ritual legislation)

The **form** of this genre consists of legal codes or covenants as well as their accompanying conditions, promises, and consequences. The **content** of this material often defines the rights, responsibilities, and ritual obligations that are inherently part of any relationship among God's people but especially in their relationship to Him. The **function** of this genre is to make people

aware of their responsibilities and obligations to God and of the consequences for fulfilling or not fulfilling these obligations.

- c) Prophetic material (judgement oracles, preaching, salvation/deliverance oracles)

The **form** this genre takes consists of a “word” from God to His people either directly or mediated through an appointed messenger. The **content** of this “revelation” or “word” can be a call to repentance, an announcement of judgment, a promise of deliverance or restoration, the revelation of future events, etc. The **function** of this form is frequently eschatological in nature pointing to the achievement of God’s ultimate purposes either in salvation/deliverance/restoration/blessing or in judgment/destruction/vengeance/wrath. As such, it vindicates God in the end.

- d) Poetry/Praise

The **form** this genre takes are expressions of some form of communication with God or about God either in celebration, desperation, or adoration. The **content** typically consists of prayers, praise songs or declarations, lament, etc). The **function** of this form is to petition God directly, to render appropriate praise to God about God personally or corporately so that our lives may be lived in acceptable worship and service before Him.

- e) Wisdom

The **form** wisdom material takes can be either timeless pieces of advice arranged in ways to aid memory or to present truth in striking ways. Sometimes wisdom material occurs in non-proverbial settings in which case the material is often involves an extended dialog with Deity. The **content** of both proverbial and non-proverbial wisdom literature has to do with the way life is lived and often consists of instruction or warning about how to live acceptably before God (Proverbs), about the value and purpose of life (Ecclesiastes), the heart felt emotions of relational life (Song of Solomon), or the age old problem of affliction and suffering in life (Job). The **function** of wisdom material is to provide instruction and skill for living a life that pleases God.

III. Theological Considerations

- A. Remember that the Old Testament is historically limited and bounded by a specific cultural context.

Examples of this would be slavery, multiple wives, having heirs through maidservants, etc. Jesus dealt with this aspect from time to time by appealing to the eternal, governing principle when dealing with non-normative elements such as the permission granted by Moses for divorce under certain conditions. The timeless consideration is that God hates divorce.

- B. Remember that the Old Testament has national limitations.

Examples of this would be the land laws, the laws of lending and borrowing, the laws of cooking and eating, etc. The contemporary expositor must identify the divine governing purpose of principle.

- C. Remember that the majority of the Old Testament was bound under a national and individual obligation to the Mosaic Covenant.

This covenant had a specific purpose for a specific group of people living during a specific stage in God's administration of His unfolding plan.

- D. Remember that the Old Testament has theological limitations.

The Old Testament does not present the full story. For example, revelation about Messiah unfolded over a lengthy period of time. What is true is that every generation was responsible to know and obey all the revelation they had been given up that point.

Conclusion: A way forward to accurately exegeting the Old Testament

1. Find the Divine Principle – look for what is being taught about God's nature or His eternal purposes or expectations.
2. Find the Divine Purpose – look for how God is administering and unfolding His eternal plan to eventually re-gather everything under Christ as it once was when He saw that it was "good." The heavenly realm will be permanently restored to its original perfection before the fall of Satan. The earth will be permanently remade to its original perfection before Adam Fell.
3. Find the Divine Perspective – what is being revealed that would tell us God's perspective on culture, society, human nature, etc. God has told us what He has declared appropriate behavior and we have a divine record declaring and authenticating that perspective.
4. Recognize and identify points of continuity and discontinuity between the successive eras of God's unfolding administration of His ultimate plan.