

PROCLAIMING OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE

A WORKSHOP FOR LECTORS

INTRODUCTION

This brief workshop is intended to aid in refreshing and refining your skill in proclaiming Old Testament readings. Hopefully you will be better able to discern the contemporary meaning of the reading and proclaim it with conviction.

At the outset it is important to understand that the work of the lector is to proclaim the readings, not to “pray” them; to bring the readings to life for the assembly, not merely to read to them. To communicate the meaning of a written text, the reader needs to highlight those words and phrases that carry the weight of meaning and subordinate those which -- while important -- are not as important as the key words and phrases. In addition, the effective reader controls the variations in his or her voice so that the listeners are able instantly to grasp what is important and what is less so. Likewise, the reader communicates the full meaning of a text only when he or she is able to give some indication of the emotional tone as well as the logical content of the passage.

We are the storytellers of the greatest story ever told.

HEBREW BIBLE OVERVIEW

There are 39 books in the Old Testament which are accepted by all major Christian faiths. The Hebrew Scripture is divided into The Law, The Prophets and The Writings. Christians use those three Hebrew divisions and added the Historical division. The Catholic Bible includes Baruch, Judith, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, Sirach, Tobit, and Wisdom; not found in Protestant Bibles. The Catholic Bible also includes expanded versions of the books of Daniel and Esther.

The Oral Tradition of the Old Testament began before 2000 B.C. Around the time of King David in 950 B.C., the Written Tradition began. Below is a break down of the Old Testament. Books generally contained only in Catholic Bibles are in Italics.

PENTATEUCH	Abbr	Chaps.	WISDOM BOOKS	Abbr	Chaps.
Genesis	Gn	50	Job	Jb	42
Exodus	Ex	40	Psalms	Ps	150
Leviticus	Lv	27	Proverbs	Prv	31
Numbers	Nm	36	Ecclesiastes	Eccl	12
Deuteronomy	Dt	34	Song of Songs	Sg	8
HISTORICAL BOOKS			<i>Wisdom</i>	Wis	19
Joshua	Jos	24	<i>Sirach</i>	Sir	51
Judges	Jgs	21	PROPHETIC BOOKS		
Ruth	Ru	4	Isaiah	Is	66
1 Samuel	1 Sm	31	Jeremiah	Jer	52
2 Samuel	2 Sm	24	Lamentations	Lam	5
1 Kings	1 Kgs	22	<i>Baruch</i>	Bar	6
2 Kings	2 Kgs	25	Ezekiel	Ez	48
1 Chronicles	1 Chr	29	Daniel	Dn	14
2 Chronicles	2 Chr	36	Hosea	Hos	14
Ezra	Ezr	10	Joel	Jl	4
Nehemiah	Neh	13	Amos	Am	9
<i>Tobit</i>	Tb	14	Obadiah	Ob	1
<i>Judith</i>	Jdt	16	Jonah	Jon	4
Esther	Est	10	Micah	Mi	7
<i>1 Maccabees</i>	1 Mc	16	Nahum	Na	3
<i>2 Maccabees</i>	2 Mc	15	Habakkuk	Hb	3
			Zephaniah	Zep	3
			Haggai	Hg	2
			Zechariah	Zec	14
			Malachi	Mal	3

A few things to think about..

"In what sense am I interpreting a particular reading?"

Is it to be taken literally, or figuratively?

"Context, context, context."

A text taken out of context is a pretext.

"You must take into account the meaning of the words, in the languages written by the authors at the time, and not necessarily the English translation of them today."

For example, the word "brethren" had many meanings, only one of which is "brother". It meant cousins and other kin, as well as friend, comrade, fellow believer, etc.

BIBLICAL LITERARY GENRE

POETRY

Read the following passage from Exodus 15. As you do, remember this is poetry.. imaginative and concrete in matter; emotional and often, but not always, rhythmic in form.

Some time after these events, this word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram! I am your shield; I will make your reward very great."

2

But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what good will your gifts be, if I keep on being childless and have as my heir the steward of my house, Eliezer?"

3

Abram continued, "See, you have given me no offspring, and so one of my servants will be my heir."

4

Then the word of the LORD came to him: "No, that one shall not be your heir; your own issue shall be your heir."

5

He took him outside and said: "Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so," he added, "shall your descendants be."

6

Abram put his faith in the LORD, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness.

Now this from Job 4:

13

In my thoughts during visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on men,

14

Fear came upon me, and shuddering, that terrified me to the bones.

15

Then a spirit passed before me, and the hair of my flesh stood up.

16

It paused, but its likeness I could not discern; a figure was before my eyes, and I heard a still voice:

17

"Can a man be righteous as against God? Can a mortal be blameless against his Maker?

18

Lo, he puts no trust in his servants, and with his angels he can find fault.

19

How much more with those that dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed more easily than the moth!

20

Morning or evening they may be shattered; with no heed paid to it, they perish forever.

21

The pegs of their tent are plucked up; they die without knowing wisdom."

NARRATIVE

Nearly one third of the Bible is narrative (storytelling). Biblical narrative combines the qualities of literature and history. You are the storyteller and 1 Samuel: 3 comes alive in your telling...

2 *During the time young Samuel was minister to the LORD under Eli, a revelation of the LORD was uncommon and vision infrequent.*

3 *One day Eli was asleep in his usual place. His eyes had lately grown so weak that he could not see.*

4 *The lamp of God was not yet extinguished, and Samuel was sleeping in the temple of the LORD where the ark of God was.*

5 *The LORD called to Samuel, who answered, "Here I am."*

6 *He ran to Eli and said, "Here I am. You called me." "I did not call you," Eli said. "Go back to sleep." So he went back to sleep.*

7 *Again the LORD called Samuel, who rose and went to Eli. "Here I am," he said. "You called me." But he answered, "I did not call you, my son. Go back to sleep."*

8 *At that time Samuel was not familiar with the LORD, because the LORD had not revealed anything to him as yet.*

9 *The LORD called Samuel again, for the third time. Getting up and going to Eli, he said, "Here I am. You called me." Then Eli understood that the LORD was calling the youth.*

10 *So he said to Samuel, "Go to sleep, and if you are called, reply, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" When Samuel went to sleep in his place,*

the LORD came and revealed his presence, calling out as before, "Samuel, Samuel!" Samuel answered, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

DISCOURSE

Discourse presents a persuasive argument and then an explanation or perhaps the implication of a divine action or event. Not easy to proclaim and sometimes just as difficult to listen to.

In this from Deuteronomy 4, what is Moses asking of the Israelites?
What is he trying to persuade them to do?

There was the day on which you stood before the LORD, your God, at Horeb, and he said to me, 'Assemble the people for me; I will have them hear my words, that they may learn to fear me as long as they live in the land and may so teach their children.'

11

You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, which blazed to the very sky with fire and was enveloped in a dense black cloud.

12

Then the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.

13

He proclaimed to you his covenant, which he commanded you to keep: the ten commandments, which he wrote on two tablets of stone.

14

The LORD charged me at that time to teach you the statutes and decrees which you are to observe over in the land you will occupy.

15

"You saw no form at all on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire. Be strictly on your guard, therefore,

16

not to degrade yourselves by fashioning an idol to represent any figure, whether it be the form of a man or a woman,

17

of any animal on the earth or of any bird that flies in the sky,

18

of anything that crawls on the ground or of any fish in the waters under the earth.

19

And when you look up to the heavens and behold the sun or the moon or any star among the heavenly hosts, do not be led astray into adoring them and serving them. These the LORD, your God, has let fall to the lot of all other nations under the heavens;

20

but you he has taken and led out of that iron foundry, Egypt, that you might be his very own people, as you are today.

INTERPRETATION OF THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

One of the problems with trying to interpret the Old Testament is attempting to get to the contemporary message that the reading has for each of us. An answer to "What does God want us to proclaim?" has to come before "How do we proclaim it?"

The following is from Genesis 17. Is this narrative or discourse? Practice this reading silently for a few minutes and then, in one sentence, describe the meaning.

Here, then, in their thirst for water, the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst with our children and our livestock?"

4

So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? A little more and they will stone me!"

5

The LORD answered Moses, "Go over there in front of the people, along with some of the elders of Israel, holding in your hand, as you go, the staff with which you struck the river.

6

I will be standing there in front of you on the rock in Horeb. Strike the rock, and the water will flow from it for the people to drink." This Moses did, in the presence of the elders of Israel.

7

The place was called Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled there and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD in our midst or not?"

The next reading is from Job 38. What is the meaning here? What literary genre is this?

1 *Then the LORD addressed Job out of the storm and said:*

And who shut within doors the sea, when it burst forth from the womb;

9

When I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling bands?

10

When I set limits for it and fastened the bar of its door,

11

And said: Thus far shall you come but no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stilled!

Now read the following from 1 Kings. Is there a “contemporary meaning” here? How would you proclaim this reading so that even the casual listener would hear it?

Elijah went a day's journey into the desert, until he came to a broom tree and sat beneath it. He prayed for death: "This is enough, O LORD! Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers."

5

He lay down and fell asleep under the broom tree, but then an angel touched him and ordered him to get up and eat.

6

He looked and there at his head was a hearth cake and a jug of water. After he ate and drank, he lay down again,

7

but the angel of the LORD came back a second time, touched him, and ordered, "Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you!"

8

He got up, ate and drank; then strengthened by that food, he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb.

PRONUNCIATION

Although it is not an Old Testament reading, the first chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel offers a remarkable opportunity to introduce ourselves to some of the common names found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

This is the translation found in the New American Bible (NAB). Read it carefully and try to mentally pronounce each name as best you can:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab. Amminadab became the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz became the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed became the father of Jesse, Jesse the father of David the king. David became the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah. Solomon became the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asaph. Asaph became the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, Joram the father of Uzziah. Uzziah became the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah. Hezekiah became the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amos, Amos the father of Josiah. Josiah became the father of Jechoniah and his brothers at the time of the Babylonian exile.

After the Babylonian exile, Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, Zerubbabel the father of Abiud. Abiud became the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, Azor the father of Zadok. Zadok became the father of Achim, Achim the father of Eliud, Eliud the father of Eleazar. Eleazar became the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah.

How many of these names are you confident you pronounced correctly?

You can check on-line at www.netministries.org/bbasics/bbasics.html

Look at the list of books in the Old Testament earlier in this document. How many are you confident you can pronounce correctly?

Q & A:

Who determines the proper pronunciation of words in the Hebrew Scriptures?

Historians and biblical scholars have determined the probable pronunciation of ancient Hebrew when translated into English, but there are colloquial and traditional differences to consider.

What is the significance of proper pronunciation in your proclamation?

Try your best to determine the correct pronunciation, but understand that the "local" pronunciation may be your best choice. The important thing to remember is not to let pronunciation get in the way of proclamation.

What if I totally mispronounce a word or phrase?

Don't let it ruin your reading. Move on as if it never happened. The underlying meaning of the reading will probably not be affected and that is the important consideration.

Consider this from Genesis 15:17: "*When the sun had set and it was dark, there appeared a smoking brazier and a flaming torch, which passed between those pieces.*" How would you pronounce "brazier?"

Biblical quotations are taken from the on-line version of the New American Bible (NAB) ©USCCB.