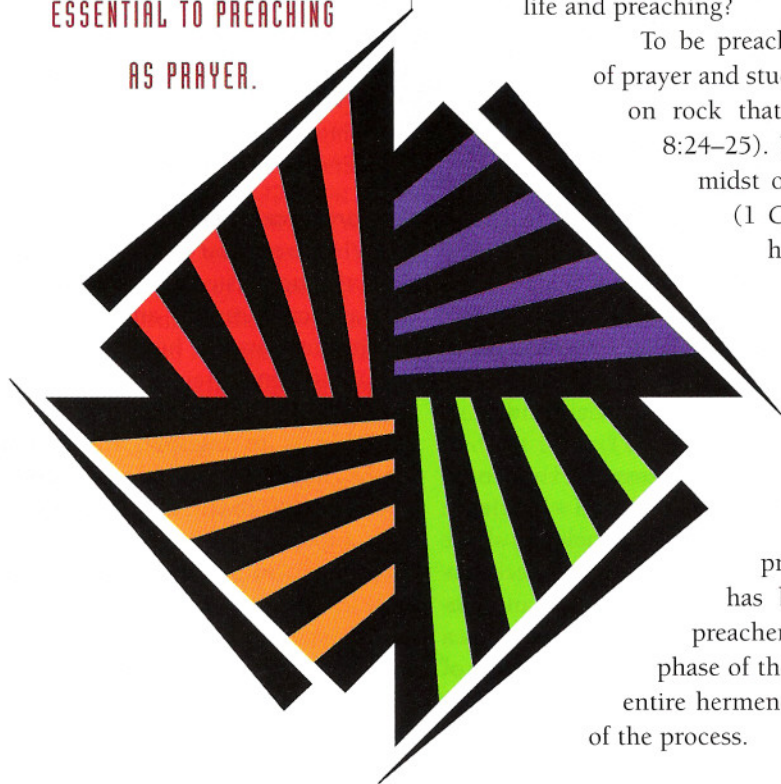


HOW DO WE APPROACH BIBLICAL
INTERPRETATION TODAY?
IMAGINE A KALEIDOSCOPE.
CHOOSE AN OBJECT INDOORS
OR OUTDOORS.
LOOK THROUGH THE LENS
AND TURN IT SLOWLY.
SEE WHAT AMAZING COLORS AND
SHAPES THE LIGHT PRODUCES.
BIBLICAL METHODS AND RESOURCES
ARE INTRICATE AND VARIED, TOO.
BEING FAMILIAR WITH THEM
AND USING THEM ARE AS
ESSENTIAL TO PREACHING
AS PRAYER.



Biblical Criticism in the World of the Preacher

by Mary Margaret Pazdan, OP

When preachers reflect on their studies in seminaries and schools of theology, many realize that connections between biblical and homiletics courses, including any prayer courses, were not always evident. In a survey of priests who had been educated after the Second Vatican Council, Barbara E. Reid, OP and Leslie J. Hoppe, OFM of Catholic Theological Union in Chicago concluded that only 27 percent of their Sunday preaching evidenced quality exegetical preparation (Barbara E. Reid, OP and Leslie Hoppe, OFM, *Preaching from the Scriptures: New Directions for Preparing Preachers*. Chicago: Catholic Theological Union, 1998, p. 21). Preachers want to improve. They know that exegesis-application is not adequate. Is there a hermeneutic, a process of interpretation, that embraces personal life and preaching?

To be preachers is to respond to the Spirit's call to lives of prayer and study. We choose this foundation to build ministry on rock that endures rain, floods, and winds (Matthew 8:24–25). Prayer assists us to discern God's voice in the midst of "resounding gongs" and "clashing cymbals" (1 Corinthians 13:1). Study opens our minds and hearts to delight in the abundant table of living tradition. How we appropriate prayer and study becomes a proclamation of God's word for our communities. This spiral process of prayer, study, and proclamation is a new hermeneutic that incorporates prayer and study to witness with our whole lives to the Good News. It invites us to re-imagine what a preaching life might look like. Since this author has been asked to present biblical tools for the preacher, the emphasis here will be on the "study" phase of the process. What follows is a brief outline of the entire hermeneutic followed by a more complete description of the process.

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A process for interpreting scripture for preaching

I. **Contemplate.** Prayer and contemplation are at the heart of the preparation process for preaching, for the preacher can only honestly proclaim a word that has been felt in the heart. Each person contemplates in his or her own way. Here are some sample approaches.

Reflect on relationships with God, others, cosmos, and self with body, mind, and spirit:

- Recognize blessings to articulate gratitude and praise.
- Recognize concerns to articulate anxiety and stress.
- Recognize blessings and concerns in ecclesial and political arenas.
- Recognize blessings and concerns of liturgical and yearly cycles.
- (Create a few images with particular colors and phrases to express discoveries.)

Let Lectionary texts, liturgical texts, and ritual actions for the approaching celebration wash over body, mind, and spirit:

- Read the texts aloud (chanting, singing, moving with images, phrases, symbols) or enact the ritual movement.
- Read the text silently and imagine the ritual action.

Be still and know that I am God (see Psalm 46:11):

- Beg for the Spirit's breath, energy, and insight.
- Listen for a connection: a word, an image, a symbol that can provide a foundation for the preaching.
- What question(s) arise(s) from this contemplation?

II. **Study.** There is no substitute for knowledge of the scriptures: their structure, their history, their cultural milieu, and so on. The preacher who is conversant with scriptural contexts and methods of critique has a framework on which to project the connec-

tions and questions that arise from contemplation. Here are some approaches to employ in scriptural study.

- Gather materials to create new understanding; read widely.
- Establish context within a biblical book.
- Attend to structure of the book and its literary genre(s).
- Choose a biblical commentary (or two).
- Select a preacher's commentary; perhaps include reflections from Internet sources.
- What new insights broaden and deepen personal contemplation?
- What new insights relate to personal interpretation of the community, liturgical celebration and season, and situations in the Church and world?

III. Preach.

- Appropriate contemplation and study anew
- Moving from personal/community appropriation to specific preaching contexts

Contemplation: Praying the texts

The heart of preaching is how we live and enter into the word of God. Barbara Brown Taylor comments,

I also believe every sermon begins and ends with God. Because the word of God is what a preacher wrestles with in the pulpit, and because it is a living word, every sermon is God's creation as well as the creation of the preacher and the congregation (Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*. Cambridge: Cowley, 1993, p. 77).

In praying Lectionary texts, we let go of their familiarity to experience something new. Praying helps to shake loose the assumption that we necessarily hold a common worldview and language with the author. We move from a first naïveté to the beginning of hermeneutics. We enter into a process whereby we understand differently because we encounter a text in a new situation. We bring our discoveries in

prayer to study. The questions we bring are especially important because they shape and direct study.

Studying: The world of biblical criticism

How do we approach biblical interpretation today? Imagine a kaleidoscope. Choose an object indoors or outdoors. Look through the lens and turn it slowly. See what amazing colors and shapes the light produces. Biblical methods and resources are intricate and varied, too. Being familiar with them and using them are as essential to preaching as prayer.

However, studying texts with contemporary methods can be surprising and sometimes disconcerting. We experience what happened to the biblical message in the shift from speaking to writing. Paul Ricoeur describes the event as "distanciation."

The relation between message and speaker at one end of the communication chain and the relationship between message and hearer at the other are deeply transformed when face-to-face relation is replaced by the more complex relation of reading to writing (Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976, p. 29).

Historical criticism

When we adjust our kaleidoscope to look through history for reconstructing the author, message, and hearer of a biblical text, we use historical criticism in an attempt to reveal what has been called "the world behind the text." Its function is to interpret the relationships and events among persons, groups, institutions, and even societies that appear in a text. What happened to persons within a particular time and culture? How does the text describe their experience? If our connections and questions are about what happened in Jesus' time, we begin our study with historical criticism.

There are two methods that investigate a text historically. The historical-

critical method has been a significant one for over two hundred years. It is *exegesis* because we are trying to understand what the author meant for a particular group of people whose lives and worldviews are distant from ours. The method is author-centered, which is to say that it focuses on the intentions and the context of the one who composed the text. This method predominates in many commentaries, books, and journals. For example, most of the commentaries found in the *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, Roland Murphy. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990) use this approach.

The social-scientific method, partner to the historical-critical method, investigates patterns of culture and human behavior. It was developed in the last few decades to respond to basic human questions in light of a first-century Mediterranean culture. Why do persons use language in particular ways to communicate with or shun one another? Why is the household a basic unit of meaning? What is honor and shame? This method is also author-centered. It offers tools to discover what first-century persons believed and alerts to the danger of interpreting a text solely from our twenty-first-century worldviews. A basic text is John J. Pilch, *A Cultural Dictionary of the Bible*. [A bibliographical listing of the texts cited in this article is found on page D7 – Editor.] Pilch also has a series for Lectionary study, *The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday, Cycles A, B, C*. Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh offer substantial commentaries on the Gospels in their *A Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* and *A Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*.

Literary criticism

Studying the “world behind the text” is one choice. It gives us an insight into God’s revelatory activity through the words of an author addressed to a partic-

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ular community. Nevertheless, our connections and questions from prayer sometimes relate to another kaleidoscopic design. This is the approach known as literary criticism or the “world of the text.” It is used to analyze the narrative features of a document, such as setting, plot, and characters, by entering into the world of the narrator and examining the truth of the text without attention to historical circumstances. We can also enter this world to analyze words, patterns, and structures. Literary criticism is text-centered. Some preachers find such narrative and rhetorical details most intriguing.

Narrative criticism is popular because

we love to tell stories. Dianne Bergant, CSA, with Richard N. Fragomeni, treats narrative and other literary genres in *Preaching the New Lectionary: Cycles A, B, C*. Another resource that explicitly addresses the Lectionary readings is the three-volume ecumenical work *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts*. The editor, Roger E. Van Harn, invited dozens of practitioners to do an analysis of texts that includes both the “world behind the text” and the “world of the text.”

Some authors offer general literary insights: Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Hearing Mark: A Listener’s Guide* and Michael Willett Newheart, *Word and Soul: A Psychological, Literary and Cultural Reading of the Fourth Gospel*. Others attend to literary features that may be of most interest to preachers: David J. Ourisman, *From Gospel to Sermon: Preaching Synoptic Texts*; Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Preaching Mark*; and Robert Kysar, *Preaching John*. Students often comment that it is not enough to study only for a homily. Studying the Bible is a way of life for preachers. Being at home with the word is one milieu for studying Lectionary pericopes. Of course, one must also be at home with the liturgy in order to build the bridges from one Sunday to the next and over the course of a liturgical season.

Rhetorical criticism, which also operates in the “world of the text,” studies how a particular structure and arrangement of words produce a persuasive message for hearers/readers. Analyzing the Letters of Paul via rhetorical criticism gives us a glimpse of Paul’s oratorical skill, how his communities received his preaching, and what strategies are available for preachers today.

Charles B. Puskas, Jr., *The Letters of Paul: An Introduction* and Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, OP, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, His Options, His Skills*
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provide excellent introductions to rhetorical criticism. In his *Preaching Paul*, Brad R. Braxton examines the effectiveness of Paul's rhetoric for both first-century and twenty-first-century communities. Likewise, Nancy Lammers Gross in her *If You Cannot Preach Like Paul . . .* attempts to make Paul's letters accessible to the contemporary preacher. If our connections and questions from prayer focus on the text, we begin study with literary criticism.

Contemporary reader response criticism

There is also a profound "fuller sense" or "deeper meaning of the text, intended by God but not clearly by the human author" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, "Document on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church." *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*. Dean P. Béchar, ed. Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, p. 283). Here the Pontifical Biblical Commission highlights another experience of distancing. When the biblical message is written down, there are unknown readers/hearers. Each generation of this future audience brings its own experiences and context to the task of biblical interpretation. Ricoeur notes, "It is part of the meaning of a text to be open to an indefinite number of readers and,

therefore, of interpretations" (Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, pp. 31-32).

Our connections and questions from prayer thus often find a home in a third kaleidoscopic design. How does the text relate to the present-day community and preacher? Contemporary reader response or "the world in front of the text," that is to say, the world of the person or community reading the biblical text now, is another place to begin study. This approach provides the tools needed to interpret texts for a local community through a mutual correlation and critique between the worldviews of authors and readers/hearers. In other words, the task is to compare the world of the author with the world of the contemporary reader and in so doing uncover new meanings or the "fuller sense" mentioned above. Because of its focus on the world of the one reading the text now, contemporary reader response criticism is said to be reader-centered.

What do we need to know about readers and hearers? An ongoing analysis of personal and community worldviews is vital. Today, "social location" is a new category that includes social, ethnic, cultural, and gender identity as means of identifying the reading audience and their potential response to biblical texts. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert edited two volumes for readers to hear biblical stories through others'

experiences, *Reading from the Place, Volume 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States and Volume 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*. They interpret stories with many types of liberationist and feminist criticism. Also, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe edited an ecumenical *Women's Bible Commentary: Expanded Edition (with Apocrypha)*. Women offer an introduction and summary of each biblical book and focus attention on passages where female characters and symbols appear.

Preaching: The word comes to life

The Word that we encountered in our contemplation and prayer has accompanied and guided us in our study and encourages us to proclaim a specific public witness to our experience. The hermeneutic of our study has led us to a "second naïveté" that allows us to interpret the biblical text from a new perspective. This new perspective lends a freshness and urgency to our preaching that may not otherwise have been possible.

Preachers know that God gives the word to us in our prayer and daily lives. Whether we study on our own or with others, whether we use one biblical tool or another, we are always in the company of "so great a cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1). We depend upon the Spirit to join our voices with theirs to witness anew the power of a preaching life. **P**

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