

A Text without a Context Is a Pretext

Both ancient and contemporary contexts matter in preaching. I often sum up ancient contexts under the rubric: Iron Age Theology. Ancient contexts include the social cultural contexts of the Scriptures, the Ancient Near East with regard to the Hebrew Scriptures. Other crucial contexts include the literary contexts of the text and, the temporal contexts of the text. Manuscript and translation issues as well as the genre of the passage are significant here. By temporal contexts I mean the time in which the passage is set as well as the time in which it received its final editing.

Preachers must understand that no matter how familiar or beloved a text may be, it is set in a time, place, and culture that is at some distance from the time, place, and culture of the preacher. And just because words and expressions in the translated text bear affinity to the use of those words and expressions in that language in which the preacher operates does not mean that those meanings are the same across time and space.

Contemporary contexts are just as crucial. The preacher-interpreter must know what she is bringing to the text in herself as well as where she will proclaim the text. I offer three guiding questions:

1. What does the text say?

This can only truly be answered with any degree of certainty by reading the text in its original language. Even in the best translations for classrooms and congregations there are often great differences between what the text says and how it is translated. And, translation notes are often at a minimum in the editions of Scripture with which many preachers work.

2. What did the text mean?

How was the passage or the story within the passage understood as it was first uttered, as an oral composition? How did that understanding evolve as it was preserved and canonized? What cultural assumptions did its first hearers recognize, share, and understand? What allusions to the broader body of ancient Near Eastern literature are contained within it? What literary clues indicate the genre of the piece? In what ways was the text regarded as true or authoritative? What notions of truth and historicity were operative in the culture that produced the text? Was the message more important than the details? Was the story widely regarded as a tale that conveyed an essential truth?

3. What does the text mean now?

I am not particularly interested in the history of interpretation though that may follow for some here. I am more interested in what others have called hermeneutical transfer. What affects the way we interpret the text in our own time? What remains and endures across time and culture? What has changed? It is important to be honest about conceptions of the world in the text that we do not share.

Lastly, as it pertains to the Hebrew Scriptures, it is critical to understand how a particular text functions in its own context independently of how later Christian authors read the text. It is imperative to recognize the authority and integrity of the Hebrew Scriptures on their own, without a christological lens. Christian readings are appropriate for Christians but are by no means the only or even most correct way to engage the text.

Christian preachers would do well to read the Hebrew Scriptures in the company of a colleague in the flesh or in the form of critical commentary.

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