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1. Bible
2. Oral interpretation
- I. Title

A Review of
ORAL INTERPRETATION OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE

by

Chloe Armstrong

Presented to Mr. Ronald Griffin
in fulfillment of requirements
for Honors Special Studies.

Rita Lewis

December 17, 1971

Members of today's society, upon hearing the word Bible, immediately associate it with the Christian religion as its guide book, its creed, and its collection of doctrinal material. The term Bible is synonymous with the Holy Scriptures and the Word of God. In short, people of our culture whether they themselves are Christians, view the Bible as a symbol of Christianity and its sole source of religious dogma.

However, besides its religious worth, the Bible also is universally considered an unrivaled compilation of timeless literature. Many scholars have attested to this fact including Frederic Kenyon who stated, "Apart from its religious value, the Bible is a collection of one of the great literatures of the world, one which has had vital influence on the development of our own literature."¹

Due to this literary importance, much discussion has arisen concerning the reading of the Bible and the method in which it is read. Bishop Horace W. B. Danegán said, "It is essential that people should read the Bible itself. But it is equally important that they should know how to read it."² (page 1)

Chloe Armstrong, of the department of Oral Communication

¹Chloe Armstrong, Oral Interpretation of Biblical Literature (Minneapolis, 1968).

All references contained in this paper are taken from this book.

at Baylor University, Waco, Texas, obviously recognizes the value in any and all manners of reading the Bible, but she especially advocates reading it aloud. She says, "There are occasions when the individual will want to read the Bible silently, reflectively, and meditatively. But there are unique values gained by the person who seriously studies how to read the Bible aloud, and then develops his skills to read effectively. Much of the value of oral reading of the Bible belongs to the listener, for it is he who shares with the knowledge and skill of the reader."³ (page 22)

It undoubtedly was her firm belief in the importance of this subject which led her to write Oral Interpretation of Biblical Literature. This paper is the result of an attempt to read, review, summarize, and understand this book.

Before considering the actual interpretation, perhaps it would be wise to examine the purposes and reasons for such oral reading. First, the question must be raised, "Why read the Bible aloud?"

There are several justifications for oral reading of this type, but to begin to answer the question it may be stated that the tradition of the Bible is oral. Therefore, reading it orally places the Bible in its natural habitat. The literature of Israel began in spoken form and continued in that manner many years before anyone thought of writing it down. The people told stories, listened to wise sayings and riddles, and handed all of these down from generation to generation by word of mouth. In this way portions of the Bible were circulated and kept intact as part of the Israelite literary heritage.

Eventually, however, ancient literature was put into written form, but the oral background had a definite influence. The

literature was written specifically to be read aloud; writers took this into consideration. In this way, oral reading determined the literary form of the written passages.

In order to better understand this, we need only to look at the letters recorded in the New Testament. These letters were written to be read aloud at the meeting of the church and were, therefore, public documents which needed to be written with great care. Many of the letters contained certain passages that could not be fully appreciated until read aloud. Those letter-writers knew that what they wrote would be copied and read by a large public; it is reasonable to assume they would put their best care into the writing, and use the language and structural form most adaptable for oral presentation. (page 4)

Another answer to the question "Why read the Bible aloud?" lies in the current interest in oral reading. The oral reading of scripture is still an important part of our church services. "It would be difficult to estimate how many of us hear the Bible read aloud more than we read it silently." ⁴ (page 5) More evidence of this growing interest can be seen in the recent establishment of special courses in colleges and universities, and also in the participation in adult seminars dealing with oral interpretation of the Bible.

Why read the Bible aloud? The ancient tradition of oral reading and the existing current interest in learning to correctly read the Bible aloud seem sufficient justification.

After concluding that this type of oral reading is time worthy, we may consider the preparations and methods involved. Miss Armstrong seems to feel preparation is mandatory. She says, "It is

imperative that the Bible ~~be~~ read not only after a thorough study of the text, but also after a study of the available sources for preparation. To attempt reading without such background information is unfair to the listener, to the reader, and most of all to the book being interpreted - the Bible."⁵ (page 6)

One of the primary aspects of proper preparation is a careful review of the historical background of the text. "The books of the Bible, like all selections of literature, must be read in the light of their own times, and with an understanding of the purposes of the writings."⁶ (page 23) A brief resume' of the historical setting would include the following: The location and climate of Palestine had a great influence on the intellectual and material life of the people. Most of the soil was hilly and poor. Its location made the Hebrew nation a prime target for invasion. Due to this fact, Palestine was encircled by and subjected to many empires including the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires. Although greatly influenced by these foreign cultures, the Hebrews retained much of their own identity through native customs and traditions. (page23) All of these factors must be taken into consideration when studying and evaluating the impact of historical events upon the writing of the scripture.

Another method of effective preparation is a thorough study of the passage at hand using the several different translations which are available today. Miss Armstrong illustrates the value of this practice with a comparison of three versions of I:Corinthians 13. I thought this was very interesting and worth including in this paper. Portions of the translations are as follows:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

...Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth.

KING JAMES VERSION

I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but if I have no love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal; I may prophesy, fathom all mysteries and secret lore, I may have such absolute faith that I can move hills from their place, but if I have no love, I count for nothing.

...Love is very patient, very kind. Love knows no jealousy; love makes no parade, gives itself no airs, is never rude, never selfish, never irritated, never resentful; love is never glad when others go wrong, love is gladdened by goodness, always slow to expose, always eager to believe the best, always hopeful, always patient. Love never disappears.

JAMES MOFFATT TRANSLATION

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

...Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

REVISED STANDARD VERSION

It is interesting to note the difference in terms the respective translators chose to depict the same basic thought. A change of just a few words may cause only a shade of difference or may result in a completely different connotation. The conscientious oral interpreter, by studying several translations of the same passage, will come to a deeper awareness of the intended message of his chosen passage.

Other sources of valuable information leading to a better understanding of the Bible are biblical commentaries and similar

critical works. In the field of theology there are many, many great scholars, some of whom have spent their lives studying and writing about the Bible. "These outstanding professors and scholars are studying and sharing their knowledge and insight with all who will read their books."⁷ (page 28) The oral reader would do well to read and study these books during his preparation for reading. He undoubtedly would come to a deeper understanding through the study of writings by the great masters trained in theology.

For a final method of preparation Miss Armstrong states, "In the study of the Bible the most important source is the Bible itself."⁸ (page 29) Reading each book or chapter receptively offers the best knowledge of the nature of its content and the purpose for which it was written. For example, if a reader is preparing to read the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), he needs to know that Moses is speaking and giving a code of laws by which the people will be governed. For a deeper understanding he should study the relationship of this particular portion to the total development of the Hebrew history. He should at least partially realize what had taken place before the laws were given, why and how Moses was chosen to give the laws, whether the laws were ever modified, and what influence the laws had on the total religious and historical life of the Hebrew people. (page 30)

If the reader has based some of his preparation for understanding on the Bible itself, he will interpret the passage more correctly and authentically.

After preparing for a better, more thorough understanding of the Bible by studying the history and by utilizing various translations, commentaries, critical writings, and the material contained in the Bible itself, other aspects are left to be considered. One of these, to which special attention should be

given, is the language in which the Bible was written. Miss Armstrong contends, "It is through the language that thoughts and feelings are expressed."⁹ (page 33) The Hebrews were a people concerned a great deal in sense impression and emotion. Their language exemplifies this through its sound and rhythmic motion. Of course much of these qualities is lost through translation, but where this sound and rhythm remains, it should be respected and given expression when orally interpreted. An excellent example of the remaining effects of the Hebrew language is found in Isaiah 40:12. "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?"

One other aspect must be considered at this point. The figure of speech known as imagery must be noticed, observed, and properly interpreted. The reader must understand similes, metaphors, and other forms of imagery in order to better relay the true message to his listeners.

Another interesting point to keep in mind is the distinct difference between the Old and New Testaments. Whereas the Old Testament is a history of a people, the New Testament is a record of a movement. The New Testament is written simply and naturally in the Greek language which was prevalent during the first century. The writers did not intend to write literature or record events; they merely wanted to reach the public and get results. (page 37) For the above reasons, the New Testament should be given special treatment. The reader should interpret the New Testament in accordance with the above. The Letters should be read as letters, and all emotional overtones relayed to the listeners.

Regardless of the differences between the Old and New Testaments, the entire Bible, as a whole, includes three primary literary classifications. Miss Armstrong lists these as: informal prose, narrative prose, and poetry. The reader must determine into which category his selection falls and interpret it accordingly.

A brief definition of these three classifications will be given at this point.

Informal prose consists of addresses and letters. When a reading is obviously an address, we may assume an audience was present and that the purpose of the writing was to persuade or convince. This should be taken into consideration as an address is read and interpreted. The letters involve a personal flavor, and should be presented in a conversational manner.

Narrative prose is made up of "stories". These include the favorites told by the storytellers of the Bible. In preparing to read a biblical story, the reader must understand the literary elements such as character, setting, and plot. He must be able to demand the attention of the audience and hold it throughout the dramatic rise and fall of the plot.

Many different types of poetry are contained in the Bible. These include songs, lyrics, odes, and dramatic monologues. Most general suggestions for oral interpretation are applicable to all the literature of the Bible; however, there are certain aspects of poetry that require special consideration. Because poetry is compact and concentrated, it requires a special use of language by the poet and a keen awareness of language on the part of the interpreter. Poetry deals with ideas and emotions and this must be considered by the interpreter. Miss Armstrong summarized the interpretation of poetry quite well in stating, "A poet's ear is a

attuned to the sound of work, and therefore the oral interpreter must have a sensitive ear to the sound of poetry."¹⁰ (page 52)

Thus far, the methods of preparation discussed in this paper have dealt with preparation for understanding. We are now ready to consider the subtopic, "Preparation for Presentation."

Upon the foundation of understanding, we must build methods of relaying the information to our audience. The interpreter has at his disposal two instruments: his body and voice.

The oral interpreter may use several aspects of his body including posture, bodily movement, and eye contact. His posture should be as casual as possible. (This helps both the audience and the interpreter himself to be at ease.) He should strive to correct negative habits such as keeping his hands in his pockets or removing glasses, as these activities may distract attention from what he is saying. Primarily, he should choose a comfortable and confident stance, and work at maintaining it throughout his presentation. (page 69).

There are no set rules as to whether bodily movement or gestures are appropriate in orally interpreting the Bible. Essentially, the reader should remember, that "his whole body is a sounding board for what he is presenting. It is difficult to suggest how one can develop appropriate gestures and bodily movement, for movement must be unobtrusive and spontaneous."¹¹ (page 71)

There are two factors to consider. The first, and most important, is the reader himself. Each reader has his own distinct personality and it is reflected in his manner of interpretation. An active, outgoing person may naturally use more gestures than a timid person, and these gestures may be equally as appropriate as the quiet move-

ments used by the reserved person. The second factor to consider is the material being read. If the reading is a dramatic poem, it certainly would require more elaborate gestures than a quiet portion of the Bible. The reader must take into consideration the type of reading he will present and the type personality he possesses in deciding which and how many gestures to use. "The important thing is that the reader must be physically responsive."¹² (page 71)

Eye contact is the next aspect to be considered by the oral reader. There are several arguments for keeping the eyes fixed on the page. Some of these are: the nature of the message requires reverence; keeping the eyes fixed on the page gives the reader more freedom in expression through voice and body; looking up makes it difficult for the reader to maintain his place on the page. (page 74) Miss Armstrong suggests determining the purpose in reading and the best method in achieving that purpose. If the reader decides that total communication is his primary objective, "he should realize that his eyes are as much a part of his communicating as is his voice."¹³ (page 74) Extensive eye contact offers a tremendous obstacle, but this can be overcome. The solution is simply that the reader "must know the selection."¹⁴ (page 74) He need not memorize, but he must be thoroughly familiar with the reading. He should also know how it is arranged on the page in order that an occasional glance at the page is sufficient. Basically, he should be very aware of the message of his reading, and of the audience to whom he is presenting this message. Eye contact should be employed at his discretion in order to more effectively communicate.

The voice is the reader's second instrument for communication. We are told, "A good voice is one which is easily understood and

pleasant to listen to."¹⁵ (page 59) But what specific qualities make some voices better than others? Miss Armstrong lists five such characteristics, the first of which is projection.

"A good voice must be clearly heard."¹⁶ (page 59) Often when a reader is told to project, he gets louder. He is confusing projection with loudness. It is quite possible to properly and sufficiently project a whisper. Projection, rather than a change in volume, is "the act of directing the voice to a specific target."¹⁷ (page 60) The reader must know the audience and the occasion, and must adjust this "direction" to the situation.

The second characteristic of a "good" voice is tempo. "Variety in tempo is just as essential for effective reading as variety in volume."¹⁸ (page 61) However, variety is tempo just for the sake of variety or to show the "great artistry of the voice,"¹⁹ is probably worse than no variety at all. (page 61) Tempo is an effective device in mood changes. The reader should be able to adjust the tempo of his voice to the change of the mood. He should be sensitive to the different moods and feelings and should relay these to his listeners by his use of tempo.

Pitch is another vital factor of a good voice. "The reader who can use various pitch levels is able to express shades and subtleties of meaning much more effectively than the one who cannot."²⁰ (page 65) Pitch variety is just as important as variety of volume and tempo. The reader can use variety of pitch "to clarify the meaning, to convey emotional state, and to emphasize a thought."²¹ (page 65) Because flexibility of pitch is so valuable, readers should practice, utilizing this characteristic to its fullest.

The pause, I believe, is one of the most effective devices.

Often, more meaning can be communicated through a moment of silence than through many, many words. Miss Armstrong defines the pause as "thoughtful silence".²² (page 63) The pause is not just a break in reading, it is a brief moment given to the listener to think, reflect, and possibly react. Pauses are a type of "oral punctuation", a means of emphasis, a way of pointing to the significant. However, valuable as they are, pauses must be used correctly and sparingly. When misused, they give an impression of strain that detracts from the meaning. When used correctly, they may be the most effective characteristic of oral interpretation.

The final characteristic of a good voice as given by Miss Armstrong is quality. "Quality has been defined as that component of voice not included in the other elements of projection, tempo, and pitch. It is frequently identified with personality."²³ (page 66) Quality of voice is what distinguishes one voice from another. It is simply "his" voice. A reader should be aware of the defects in his voice quality, and should, if possible, correct these. Most defects can be eliminated by intelligent use of the vocal mechanism. (page 66) Quality can be improved by working with resonance. Harshness is minimized by relaxing the throat and increasing resonance. Nasality can be helped in the same manner. The conscientious reader should work to improve his articulation of all speech sounds. This facet of quality is definitely involved in developing a "good voice."

After the reader has studied his selection until he feels he "understands" it sufficiently and he has prepared for presentation by practicing the utilization of both his body and voice, he is

ready to prepare for the actual presentation. "The wise reader considers his introduction, conclusion, and use of his manuscript very carefully."²⁴ (page 77)

The introduction is vital in that it must prepare the audience for the reading. It must "polarize the interest of the audience and bring it to focus on the material."²⁵ In the introduction, the reader must clarify the theme and mood of the selection he is about to read. He tries to "establish a common ground on which he and his audience can meet and share the literature of the Bible."²⁶ (page 77)

What then should the introduction include in order to satisfy all these requirements? Obviously, the chapter and book of the Bible from which the selection is taken should be given. Also, background material, character identification, and the central theme are pertinent remarks. All of these introductory remarks may center around a provocative question, a rhetorical question, a direct statement to the audience, or a number of other approaches. The point to remember is that an introduction of some kind is necessary.

The use of the manuscript is another aspect which raises many different views. In interpreting secular material a manuscript is always prepared; in interpreting the Bible, however, using the Bible itself is the best policy. "It will be a constant reminder to the audience that what you are reading comes from the Bible."²⁷ (page 78) The best choice of a Bible to read from is one that is of average size with print that is clearly visible. The use of a reading stand is entirely optional. Miss Armstrong says, "If he uses a reading stand, he will use one that will not interfere or get between him and his listeners."²⁸ (page 79) The reader's choice of a Bible and whether to use a stand is entirely his own; communi-

cation with his audience should be his main objective in these decisions.

"Concluding the reading often presents a more difficult problem than preparing the introduction."²⁹ (page 79) Without stating the fact in words, the reader can relay the message to the audience in his manner of reading. He might use a change in tempo, a pause, or a variation of pitch. Miss Armstrong adds this final thought, "Do not detract from the meaning by rushing to your seat. Pause and give time for the audience to think on what has been read, and then go to your place."³⁰ (page 79)

My personal thoughts about this book are all quite positive. First, it was written clearly enough that a person could learn from it without extensive study. The material was presented in a very organized manner, and all the material was practical.

The chapter on Preparation for Understanding was particularly enlightening. I feel it is very good preparation for a reading to consider the backgrounds both of the setting and of the character. The section on the study of various translations was my favorite part of the book. I agree, after having read this, that reading different versions of the same passage can certainly shed new light on the selection.

Although the chapter Preparation for Presentation repeated much that I have already studied in the various speech courses, the chapter contained much that is vital to a good oral presentation. The section dealing with whether to use gestures in reading the Bible was interesting.

Overall, this book was well worth my time, effort, and study. I feel that I definitely learned much that I hope will be put to practical use.