

Guide to Writing in Religion: Exegetical Method
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Exegetical Procedure

Every interpreter of Scripture faces the danger of imposing his or her ideas on the text, and bending it to say what he or she wants to say, rather than letting the Scripture guide the interpretation. Faithful exposition of the Bible, however, means letting the text speak for itself. Exegetical method is a tool to help interpreters hear the passage and not impose inappropriate notions upon it.

As with any other useful tool, exegesis takes time to learn how to use. It may at first seem awkward and time-consuming. But like any other tool, skillful use of exegesis is worth learning how to do, because it will enable you to do something you otherwise could not do. Exegesis will repay your efforts to master it. The virtue of a step-by-step method like this is that when you confront a text which does not at first suggest its meaning and significance to you, you have an approach to use which will let you get at that meaning. It also allows you to check your own impressions of the text.

This exegetical procedure has been modified to help you analyze a text in English translation. Apart from utilizing the original biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek it is impossible to do thorough exegesis. There is, however, much that you can discover about a text with the aid of reliable tools apart from examining the original language of the text. The following steps are ordered for the sake of critical analysis though you will find that the steps are actually part of an entire process. As you complete each of the following steps, though, continue to ask yourself two questions:

- 1) What do I now know about the meaning of the passage I did not know before?
- 2) What questions do I have about the text that still have to be answered?

Read the text in English translation (NRSV for this class). Write down your questions of the text and any observations about what you believe the text is saying. Pay close attention to the language of the text. What words and concepts seem important? What words or phrases are repeated?

Compare your translation with that of four or five other translations (e.g., RSV, NEB, NAB, Good News, Jerusalem Bible, KJV, Moffatt, Phillips, etc). Paraphrased versions of the Bible are not acceptable. Where and how do the translations differ from your NRSV translation? Pay close attention to the use of different words and grammatical constructions. What might account for the differences? Are they based on a different understanding of the words? different understanding of grammatical constructions? different ways of saying the same thing in English? different emphasis in the passage? Apart from a knowledge of the biblical languages, you will be unable to get behind the

translations to their common source, but you will be able to see better through this step certain points you will want to examine more closely. Concordances and word books are quite helpful for examining the meaning of the words in the text.

Analyze the form of the text. What is the relation of the sentences in the text to one another?

1. Outline the text. Show in your outline where the major movements of thought occur in the text, and what parts of it are explanatory of those major movements. In your outline use your own descriptive language. Give the major movements of the text Roman numerals (e.g., I, II, III, etc), major supporting points under them capital letters (e.g., A, B, C), and minor points under each of these with numerals (e.g., 1, 2, 3, etc) followed by lower case letters (e.g., a, b, c, etc). Pay close attention to structural features indicated by word order, particles, separate pronouns, repeated words or phrases, parallelisms, contrasts, changes in tense or person, and the relation of subordinate clauses to their subject. For further help, see "Tips on Outlining."
2. Identify the form and style of the text. Does the text have an identifiable form? Are its formal characteristics a legend, law, myth, poetry, lament, letter, saying, prediction, etc.? Are its stylistic features that of hortatory, narrative, evocative, admonitive, illustrative, informative, performative (e.g., blessing, curse), prescriptive, didactic, etc.? See especially R. Soulen's Handbook of Biblical Criticism which is on reserve.
3. Consult parallel passages, where they exist. Your Bible will be of considerable help here. Check the notes for leads to related passages. Also check other translations for possible connections. Your own knowledge of the Scriptures will assist you, too. Comparing your text with parallel materials will often give clues about what changes the author made in the text. Quotations from, or allusions to, other passages will often provide a further clue about the text's intention and form. Allusions to other literature, where it can be identified, provide further clues to the shape and meaning of your text.

Analyze the Key Concepts of the Text. Key Concepts are those words in a text which are most important for the thought of the text. Understanding these concepts can deepen your understanding of the text. Begin by looking up any word that you do not know and words that are repeated in the text. A Bible Dictionary will help you get at the meaning. Use a Concordance to help locate other places in the Bible or other literature where the word is used. Your aim is to understand as best as possible what this key concept meant to the author. While care must be taken not to assume that each use of the word carries all possible meanings with it, a study of other occurrences of the word often helps us understand the meaning it bears in this text.

Analyze the Context. Relate the text to its immediate context, both that which precedes and that which follows. Be alert to the fact that the immediate context itself

is embedded in the larger context of the larger section of the book, then the book itself is in relation to its context with other books and then with the Canon. The study of key concepts and context will help clarify what the writer meant with the words used in the text you are studying. The more you know of each book, the more meaningful each passage will become.

Reflect on the Text.

1. Make corrections in earlier steps of your procedure which later discoveries make appropriate. Question the text further and reflect on questions that are still unanswered.
2. Enumerate your theological discoveries. Be concise and specific; a formulation that would fit any Christian text does not capture the contribution of your specific text. Also, particularly in the study of OT passages, let the text stand on its own in your interpretation before viewing it through the lense of the NT. What has the text conveyed that you find of theological significance? Avoid the temptations to answer in broad generalities. What specific point or points does this specific text want to make?
3. State clearly the central thought of the text, so that you arrive at a clear and specific conclusion about the purpose of your text in the larger plan of the book in which it appears.
4. Consolidate and broaden your understanding of the text by consulting various commentaries. Such consultation may lead you to modify some of your findings and conclusions. Do this step only after you have completed the preceding ones.

Writing a Paper on the Text

Composition: In light of your research on the text, you are now prepared to present a summary of your study in an 8-10 page paper. This paper should include:

1. A clearly stated thesis.
2. Some discussion on the text itself highlighting particular words and grammatical-syntactical constructions and/or phrases that are problematic. What challenges and difficulties does the text raise?
3. A discussion of the structure and style of the text.
4. A discussion of the text's relationship to its immediate and larger literary contexts along with some discussion of the text's historical and social contexts.
5. A discussion of several key concepts that are essential for understanding the text.
6. A concluding section, succinctly answering these questions: a. What is the text's subject matter? b. What is said about the subject matter? c. What is the purpose or

point of what is said? d. What is the text's relevancy for yourself and others? For instance, what point in our lives does this text intersect? What problem, religious or secular, familiar to us does this text address? At what point does it challenge our normal way of understanding ourselves and our world? How does the intention of the text illumine the way we should view God? fellow human beings? ourselves? What does it say of God's intention for the way human life is to be shaped?

Form

1. Written work shall be printed from a word processor or computer.
2. All papers shall be double-spaced with one inch side-margins.
3. Students writing on a word processor or computer should use a 12-point font.
4. Primary and secondary sources must be used and cited appropriately. For guidance on proper footnote and bibliographical forms (Turabian), see the instructor or the Writing Center in Neville Hall 206, which has handbooks with sample references.

Selected Bibliography Dictionaries and Encyclopedias of the Bible:

Harper's Bible Commentary and Bible Dictionary

The Anchor Bible Dictionary

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible and Supplementary Volume

Atlas: *The Harper Atlas of the Bible*

Concordances (English):

Ellison, J.W. *Nelson's Complete Concordance of the RSV Bible*. Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1957.

Morrison, C. *An Analytical Concordance to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament*. Westminster, 1979.

Word Books:

Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. 10 vols. Eerdmanns.

Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. 6 vols. Eerdmanns.

Introductions and Handbooks:

Bailey, J.L. and L.D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook*. Westminster/John Knox, 1992.

Childs, B.S. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. Fortress, 1979.

Eissfeldt, O. *The Old Testament: An Introduction*. Harper and Row, 1965.

Kummel, W.G. *Introduction to the New Testament*. Abingdon, 1975.

Soulen, R.N. *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*. 2d. John Knox, 1981 (highly recommended)

Westermann, C. *Handbook to the Old Testament and Handbook to the New Testament*.

Biblical Theologies: Bultmann, R. *Theology of the New Testament*. Abingdon, 1951-55.

Eichrodt, W. *Theology of the Old Testament*. Westminster, 1961-67.

Kummel, W.G. *The Theology of the NT according to its Major Witnesses*. Abingdon, 1973.

von Rad, G. *Old Testament Theology*. Harper and Row, 1962-65.

Commentaries: The best commentary series is now: *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (highly recommended).

For general discussions, see the *Proclamation Commentaries*

For detailed analyses, see the series: *Hermeneia--A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*; *The Old Testament Library*; *Black's New Testament Commentary*; *The Anchor Bible Commentary*.