



Guide to Biblical Exegesis

Exegesis

A systematic process by which a person arrives at a reasonable and coherent sense of the meaning and message of a biblical passage.

Goals

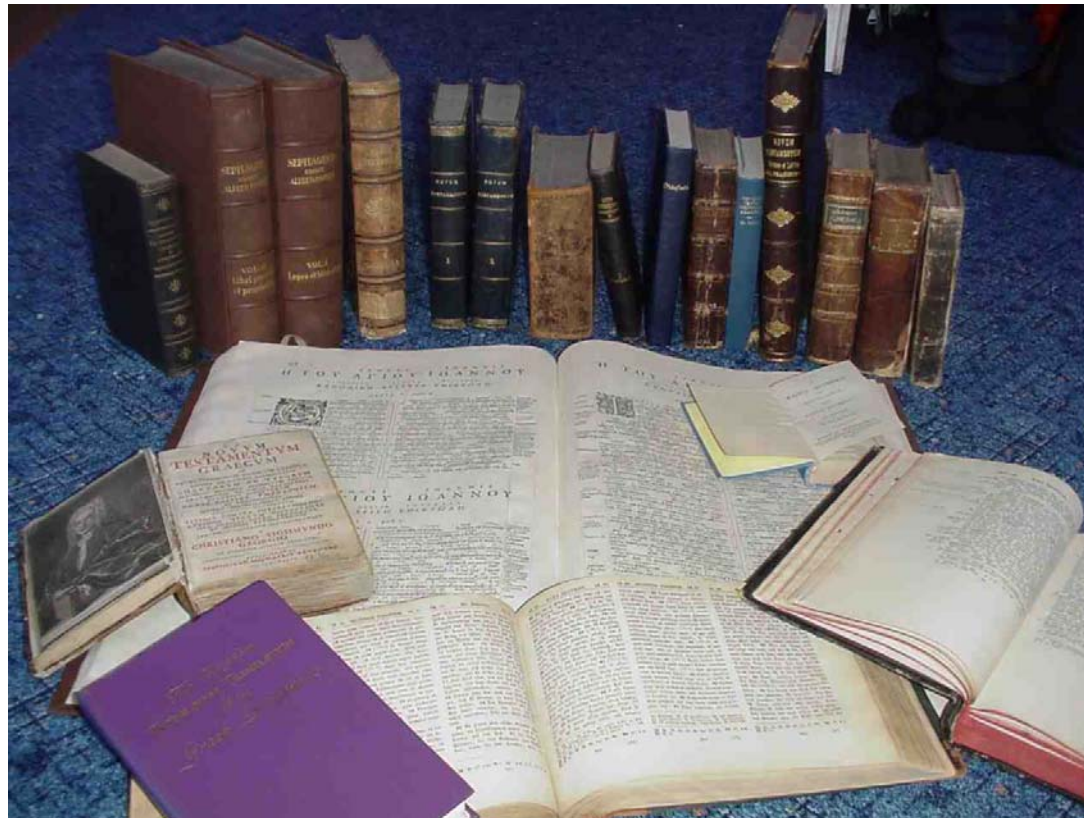
- to explain what the text meant to its original audience and in its original historical setting
- to explain what the text means for today

Three Steps of Exegesis

Step 1 - Observation: *"What does the author say?"*

Begin by reading the passage, perhaps a few times

- use a good [translation](#); it may help to read a few translations
- be sure to take account of the translation methodology
- read the larger context; the chapter or letter or book



Translation Methodologies

Formal-equivalence: The translator attempts to render each word of the original language into the receptor language and seeks to preserve the original word order and sentence structure as much as possible. The best choice for study purposes.

Dynamic-equivalence: The translator attempts to produce in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the message expressed by the original language text -- both in meaning and in style. It attempts to have the same impact on modern readers as the original had on its own audience. Easier to read and understand than the formal-equivalence translations.

Paraphrase: Technically, it means the restatement of a message in the same language but in different words than were used in the original text. It is used for any edition of the Bible that has been produced by one individual, that emphasizes freshness in style, and that seems to take substantial liberty in translation.

**New Revised
Standard Version**
(NRSV) John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

**King James Version or
Authorized Version**
(KJV) John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

**New International
Version**
(NIV) John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

In him was life, and that life was the light of men.

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

New American Bible
(NAB) John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be.

What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race;

the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

New Living Translation

In the beginning the Word already existed.

The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

He existed in the beginning with God.

God created everything through him,
and nothing was created except through him.

The Word gave life to everything that was
created,

and his life brought light to everyone.

The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness can never extinguish it.

New American Bible (NAB)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word
was with God, and the Word was God. He was
in the beginning with God.

All things came to be through him, and without
him nothing came to be. What came to be
through him was life, and this life was the light
of the human race;

the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness
has not overcome it.

Three Steps of Exegesis

Step 1 - Observation: "*What does the author say?*"

Determine the limits of the passage

- where does the writer begin/end the thought / story?

Note your specific observations concerning the passage

- what key words, images, symbols are used?
- where else are key words used
 - by the same writer?
 - By other biblical writers?
 - Outside the Bible
- what characters appear and what are their relationships?
- what issues are addressed in the passage?
- are there any variant readings noted in the footnotes?
 - = **textual criticism**
- is there a particular literary form (genre) to take note of (e.g., letter; healing; parable)?
 - = **form criticism**
- are there any structuring devices used in the text (e.g., parallelism; proofs)?
 - = **rhetorical criticism**
- did the passage have a source? do we have access to that source?
 - = **source criticism**
- what unique views or emphases does the writer place on the text?
 - = **redaction criticism**

Three Steps of Exegesis

Step 1 - Observation: "*What does the author say?*"

Note your specific observations concerning the passage (*continued*)

- how has the writer used the sources?
- what is the writer's life situation or theological outlook?
- are there any parallel texts inside or outside of the Bible
- what are the socio-cultural codes embedded in the text (e.g., honour/shame)?
= ***social-scientific criticism***
- is there any independent confirmation of the events recorded?
= ***historical veracity***

Ask yourself what cultural assumptions you might be making; e.g., economic, health, family

Use [exegetical tools](#) (commentaries, dictionaries, atlas, etc.) when necessary

Exegetical Tools

Bible Dictionaries A dictionary of the Bible is more broadly construed than a word book. While it retains a similar format in having entries under individual words, it lists not only the words used in the biblical texts but also includes entries treating a variety of related subjects, including archaeology, manners and customs, other ancient literature, etc.

Encyclopedias A Bible encyclopedia is similar in format and function to a Bible dictionary.

Handbooks Handbooks to the Bible are usually one volume references to various aspects of the biblical texts such as important places or a "who's who." Sometimes they give some general comments on the texts themselves.

Atlases A good atlas is essential for visualizing where a particular site is located or where a particular event took place. Many detailed atlases provide detailed portrayals of the movements of individuals or groups of people. Often a good overview of the biblical world at a particular point in time can be gained by consulting the maps found at the back of the Bible itself.

Commentaries Commentaries can be either one volume commentaries on the entire Bible or individual commentaries on a particular book or books of the Bible. Commentaries always reflect the methodological and theological biases of the commentator and should always be used with caution. One should consult more than one commentary, and only after thoroughly investigating the text for oneself. Good one volume commentaries include The New Jerome Biblical Commentary and Harper's Bible Commentary.

Three Steps of Exegesis

Step 2 - Interpretation: "*What does the author mean?*"

Socio-historical context: What is the author's and audience's situation?

- politics; geography; topography; demographics; customs
- use a good Bible dictionary, atlas, encyclopedia
- for whom was it written?
- what issue(s) does the passage address?

Literary context

- interpretation goes along with genre
- is the passage narrative, poetic, parable, etc.?
- should it be interpreted literally or figuratively?
- focus on significant words, phrases, statements
- what is its meaning (definitions; contextualize)?
- what is its significance in the passage?
 - why would the author choose this way of expression?
 - does it have a special grammatical role?
 - does it make a difference if it were left out?
- what is implied by the use of this term or phrase or grammatical structure?

Three Steps of Exegesis

Step 2 - Interpretation: "*What does the author mean?*"

Rhetorical context: what is the significance of the progression in the thought pattern?

- what was the author trying to convey to the audience - theological truths, practical advice, etc.?
- what types of responses did the author expect on the basis of writing this passage?

Theological context: what do you know about the author's theological perspective?

Investigate the secondary literature; compare and adjust your own observations

Concisely summarize the primary ideas of the passage; what is the author trying to convey?

Three Steps of Exegesis

Step 3 - Application: *"What does it mean for me?"*

This step involves the move from text to sermon or Bible study

This is the point at which hermeneutics comes to the fore

- moving from one social context to another
- that is, moving from the ancient world to our own world(s)

What was the author's purpose in writing this passage?

Did the author accomplish this purpose?

Does the passage contain "universal truths" (applicable in all ages) or "contextual truths" (applicable for a certain period of history)? Know how and why you make the distinction between these two "truths".

How does the passage fit with the whole message of the Bible?

Ask yourself the following questions:

- what am I to believe?
- what am I to do (actions, attitudes, sin)?
- what do I learn about relationships?
- what is the good news for me?

Now ask, "how could that be initiated in my life?"

Three Steps of Exegesis

Step 3 - Application: *"What does it mean for me?"*

Now ask "how would that be initiated in my life?"

Beware of reading twentieth century cultural norms into a passage. However, do use your imagination to apply the passage to contemporary society. This helps identify what some of the issues in the text might be.

Ask how you can address your particular audience

- how can you best explain the original meaning of the text?
- how can you help them connect with the truths of the text?

Be sure to understand your audience as best you can.

Use a format appropriate for your audience (e.g., sermon/homily; Bible study; case study; drama).