



Guidelines for Writing an Exegetical Paper

Introduction

Exegesis is a word for the systematic process by which a person arrives at a reasonable and coherent sense of the meaning and message of a biblical passage. A good exegete has learned what questions to ask of a text in order to arrive at this sense and how to find the answers. Because the right kind of questions will vary depending on the type of literature involved, and finding them is more of an art than a science, a guide such as this is not definitive, but only a crude tool.

The goal of an exegetical paper is coherently, succinctly and sensitively to open-up the meaning of the text in such a way that it reflects the particularities (e.g. "feel", plain sense, problems, ambiguities, context, potential theological *sensus plenior*, etc.) of that text alone. The reader of the paper should be left with the impression not that the student has done something new or different with the text but has understood it well, including mirroring such things as its aesthetics (or lack thereof) and problems.

Mode of Inquiry

What you're after is the text's meaning, not your own, so go slowly. By asking the text questions, *let it tell you what it means*. The correct method is not mystical or devotional, but careful and methodical. You are looking for meaning and coherence that really *is* there. To use an analogy, the text is the lead partner in a dance of meaning; your job is to follow, observe and interpret the dance with sensitivity and precision.

The nature of the object must always determine the mode of inquiry. In the case of the Bible the mode of inquiry must reflect the fact that it is both the Word of God and the word of people. In view of the Bible's character as divine revelation, the exegete should approach the text with a conviction about its implicit sensibility and with a sense of humility, tenacity, faith and, above all, reverence. Because the Bible is also the word of people, the mode of inquiry must also include the same methods that are used to understand other kinds of literature.

Provisional Method

1. Prayer

Begin (and proceed) with prayer, asking God for wisdom and insight.

2. Identify a Meaningful Unit

Compare several English translations to ensure that you are exegeting a meaning unit such as a complete paragraph. In general, the paragraph divisions in the UBS Greek New Testament or the New International Version or New Revised Standard Version are reliable guides.

3. Study the Passage

A. Text

Look in several translations for differences over what words, phrases or even verses are included as part of the 'original' text. Where differences exist consult the critical apparatus (if you know Greek and/or Hebrew) or modern in-depth commentaries such as the *Word* [BS 491.2 W67] or *Hermeneia* series.

Subtle differences in wording should be overlooked; the concerns here are obvious such as totally different wording and missing/extra phrases, etc. Normally the problems will be few and the variations minor. For the New Testament, a good resource is Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (United Bible Society, 1978).

B. Context

To orient yourself briefly to the passage use secondary sources to determine only the date, historical background, and (in some detail) the purpose and message of the entire section in which the passage is found. (This might be the book itself or it might be several books such as the Pentateuch or both.)

- In what sort of literature does your section occur?
- How does the literary form of the book and your section affect your understanding of the passage?

Don't look *yet* at what the secondary sources state specifically about your particular unit. This will prematurely channel your own thinking about the passage and block important insights.

C. Content

Using a photocopy or printout of the passage in context and different colored pencils, charts, and diagrams, highlight the presence of such things as contrasts, similarities, repetition of key words or phrases, development in argumentation, etc. both within your unit and between the *several* units that precede and follow your unit. Write out the unit itself in a way that outlines its grammar, syntax and structure. Ponder both what is and what surprisingly *isn't* in the unit (and context) and the possible significance of what you find odd or baffling. Use your analysis to assess the purpose and message of your unit in relation to the preceding and following units, and, importantly, in relation also to the purpose and message of the broader context that you noted in B above.

A good resource that exemplifies the method advocated here is Oletta Wald, *The New Joy of Discovery in Bible Study*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2002). [BS 600.2 W28].

D. Analysis of the Argument

As much as possible, move beyond what the passage is stating (and how) to an assessment of *why* it is stating it and even to why it is stating it at this particular place within the overall 'argument' of the broader section.

- What significance would the argument of your unit have had for its original hearers?

Your analysis should at least come close to being able to answer these kinds of questions. If not, you should probably read more about the historical background, purpose and theological message of the broader unit and re-examine the text within its broader context. It is true that even for the Psalms you should be looking at your unit as one would a single frame in a movie; it has a role to play within its broader context which constitutes a story or argument. To find its meaning, relate the frame to the sequence in which it is found.

E. Consult Secondary Sources

Consult several *reputable* modern commentaries. Older works (e.g. Calvin, Luther, 17th-19th century commentators) should not be ignored, particularly for theological insight on the text. Use your work in steps C and D to assess the value of the exegetical and theological insights offered and use the insights offered in the commentaries as a stimulus for your own reflection and further research (see step F below). As necessary, consult lexicons for the meaning of words, Bible atlases for geographical points of reference, Bible dictionaries for entries on relevant topics or issues, etc.

Be sure to adjudicate (and, in light of this, glean) all significant insights that you might have missed in your own analysis or any significant debates that contribute to or affect an understanding of the text and its message.

As a general rule a "reputable modern" commentary will have been published within the past 30 years and will most likely be from one of the following publishers (in addition to a university press): Abingdon, Augsburg (and/or Fortress), Baker, Brazos, T & T Clark, Continuum, Doubleday, Hendrickson, Eerdmans, Michael Glazier, The Pontifical Institute, Westminster (and/or John Knox), IVP, Word, and Zondervan.

F. Selected Further Research

Using your best judgment, decide what two or three outstanding questions will likely contribute the most to your understanding of the particular unit. Conduct the research necessary to answer these questions.

Write the Exegetical Paper

- A. The previous steps related to studying the passage should not be rehearsed or included in their entirety. Rather, the research conducted above should be integrated in such a way

that the text is opened up with freshness and sensitivity to its various dimensions (including role in context and even points of ambiguity). The essay should be a presentation of conclusions (though with clear and sufficient support) arrived at in the previous stages. It should clearly move beyond historical background and literary features to the theological meaning of the passage, but should not become a sermon.

- B. The exegetical paper should include at least brief consideration of hermeneutical aspects.
 - o What theological questions of contemporary relevance are raised by the passage?
 - o How does the passage resonate with other portions of Scripture and with the Gospel itself?
- C. The method of citing footnotes and bibliography should be consistent and should conform to *The SBL Handbook of Style* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999) [PN 147. S26] or a similar standard reference work such as K. Turabian, Wayne C. Booth & Gregory C. Colomb *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers*, 7th ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007). [LB2369 .T8 2007].
- D. Where a word study is required as part of the exegetical exercise, the word chosen should be key and a standard "how to" guide on doing a word study followed.

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Revised, Nov. 2012.