

WHAT IS EXEGESIS?

The English word "exegesis" comes from a Greek word meaning, among other things, explanation or interpretation. In biblical study it has become the accepted term for a serious endeavour to understand and explain the meaning of a passage for its original readers or hearers. This means much more than providing a paraphrase, or "putting the passage in your own words", as what follows will make clear.

Some believe that the task of exegesis also includes understanding and explaining the meaning of the passage for today's readers and hearers. More commonly this is seen as a distinct although closely related task, to which the label of "exposition" is often given.

Gordon Fee uses different terms to make this distinction:

Our concern, therefore, must be with both dimensions. The believing scholar insists that the biblical texts first of all *mean what they meant*. That is, we believe that God's Word for us today is first of all precisely what his Word was to them. Thus we have two tasks: First, to find out what the text originally meant; this task is called *exegesis*. Second, we must learn to hear that same meaning in the variety of new or different contexts of our own day; we call this second task *hermeneutics*. In its classical usage, the term "hermeneutics" covers both tasks, but in this book we consistently use it only in this narrower sense. To do both tasks well should be the goal of Bible study.

This is taken from p. 11 of the second edition of a book Fee co-wrote with Douglas Stuart, called *How to Read the Bible for All it's Worth* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1993). The book is warmly recommended to those who are looking for more thorough instruction in exegesis (and "hermeneutics") than can be provided here.

In this subject we shall concentrate on "exegesis" in the strict sense (ie. original meaning), but some attention will be given to meaning and application today. Similarly, you will be expected to concentrate on the first task in your exegetical work for assignments and the examination, but some brief attention to the second stage will be welcomed.

Getting the Big Picture

No passage can be understood in isolation. Every passage must be approached with attention to its context, both literary and historical.

1. LITERARY CONTEXT

You need to ask:

* How is the passage related to the whole book in which it is found? Or the distinct section of a book? Is it the introduction or climax or conclusion of a book or section?

For example, we shall get much more out of reading the genealogy of Matthew 1:1-17 if we read it as Matthew's introduction to the good news of Jesus the Messiah-Saviour than if we read it in isolation.

* How, especially, is it related to what comes immediately before it?

* Who is the author, and what do we know about this person?

For example, the words of Philippians 3:17a - "Join with others in following my example, brothers" - have more impact if we remember they are written by Paul and remember, or deliberately find out, something of his life.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

You need to ask:

* What is the situation in which this was written and read or heard? What information is there about this in the passage itself and beyond (including both inside and outside the Bible)?

[Note that there may be multiple answers: for historical narrative the situation of the events described is relevant, but so is the situation of the recording of these events; for a letter the situation of the writer is relevant, but so is the situation of the recipient or recipients.]

For example, it helps when reading Romans to remember that Paul hoped to visit Rome on his way to missionary endeavour in Spain (15:23-24).

Questions of date of writing, place of writing and purpose of writing arise here. Of course, we cannot always answer them with confidence.

* Are there any references to events, persons, places or customs which need to be explained? Or any such information which throws additional light on something in the passage?

For example, Matthew's comment that "when he [Joseph] heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there" makes better sense if we know something about the harsh and unpopular rule of Archelaus.

Looking Closely at the Passage

All this background is meant to help us understand the passage, so *it is important to give primary attention to the passage itself*. In doing so, the following questions are helpful ones to ask :

* What is the main idea of the passage (or occasionally, what are the main ideas)? This is basic and remains important throughout.

For example, you are in danger of being sidetracked by the admittedly difficult issues raised by the mention of being "baptized for the dead" in I Corinthians 15:29 if you fail to keep Paul's main idea in mind, ie. that belief in resurrection is essential to Christian faith.

* Are there any words or phrases which need explaining? Are there any words or phrases which contribute especially strongly to the effect of the passage, and whose effect should be highlighted?

For example, any attempt to bring out the meaning of II Thessalonians 2:3 must discuss who "the man of lawlessness" is.

* Are there any literary characteristics which need to be appreciated, such as repetition or metaphors or rhetorical questions?

For example, any adequate understanding of Ephesians 1:3-14 must reckon with the repetition of "in Christ" and equivalent expressions (ten times, by my reckoning).

* Are there any allusions to or quotations of other passages of the Bible (or, less often, other literature)? What do these contribute to the meaning of the passage?

For example, in order to understand what it means for Jesus to be a high priest "in the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 6:20 - 7:22) it is necessary to know both about the story found in Genesis 14:20 and about the use of the same expression in Psalm 110.

* Are there any difficulties of interpretation?

For example, in interpreting Romans 7:7-25 we must enter into the debate over what "I" means here. Is Paul referring to his own experience or something broader, and is it Christian or pre-Christian experience, or both together?

* What contribution does this passage make to the book (or section of a book) in which it is found?

For example, a discussion of the prologue of John's Gospel (1:1-18) should at some point talk about the way it introduces key themes of that Gospel.

* What does this passage say to us today?

For example, exegesis of the story of the "rich young man" in Mark 10:17-25 might helpfully be followed by discussion of how a Christian should respond today (helped, I would suggest, by attention to Mark 10:26-31).

Getting it Down on Paper

When you have considered all these things and are ready to write, you need to remember that they were prompts to help you, not a blueprint for writing your exegesis. You do not need to deal with all the matters raised above, only those which are relevant to your passage. And they are not meant to dictate the structure of what you write.

Generally it is good to begin with general comments on the passage (especially **briefly** placing the passage as a whole in its literary and historical context), then to exegete verse by verse, using information assembled in answering the questions above as it becomes relevant. You may well end with a brief general statement, including any attempt to relate it to contemporary readers.

Full sentences should be used in writing exegetical assignments. General comments should be in normal paragraph form, as in an essay. But comments on specific verses can be presented as less connected sentences headed by the verse number or numbers (or quoted words).

Tools for the Task

Your main tools will be a good translation of the Bible, or preferably several good translations, and an appropriate number of good commentaries. You should seek to appreciate the force of the original Greek as thoroughly as possible, so you are encouraged to make use of an interlinear New Testament (or of the Greek text itself, if you are able). The more literal translations, such as the NASB, RSV and NRSV, are particularly useful for close study of the Bible, especially if you do not go back to the Greek. Moderately literal translations, such as the NIV and GNB, are also useful, especially in getting an accurate overall impression. Very free translations and paraphrases, such as the Living Bible and The Message, are not generally appropriate for exegetical work. The number and kind of commentaries used will depend on the purpose of one's exegesis and the time available. But for formal academic study it is important to consider the comments of several competent scholars, and it is desirable to include at least one commentary which deals with the Greek text.

Tools which will sometimes, but not consistently, be useful include:

- * a good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia, such as *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (1 vol., edited by David N. Freedman, Eerdmans, 2000) or *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (4 vols., edited by G.W. Bromiley et al., Eerdmans, 1979-1988)
- * a good Bible atlas, such as the *New Bible Atlas* (edited by J.J. Bimson et al., IVP, 1985) or *The Macmillan Bible Atlas* (edited by Aharoni and Avi-Yonah, 3rd edition revised by Rainey and Safrai, Macmillan, 1993)
- * a concordance to the translation you use most, such as *The NIV Complete Concordance* (edited by Goodrick and Kohlenberger, Hodder and Stoughton, 1981)
- * a Dictionary of New Testament Theology, either the three-volume dictionary edited by Colin Brown (Paternoster, 1975-1978) or the one-volume abridgement of Kittel and Friedrich's ten-volume dictionary, edited by G.W. Bromiley (Eerdmans, 1985)

WHAT ABOUT EXAMS?

The above instructions are directed primarily at situations where there is reasonable time available and access to resources. But in an exam time is limited and normally only a single translation of the Bible is provided. So what should you do?

It is necessary to do only as much of the above as is possible, and to concentrate on essentials. A guide to such an exam-appropriate approach is provided below.

In exegetical notes in an examination you should:

- * explain the meaning of the passage as a whole
- * discuss the relationship between the passage and the book from which it comes, particularly looking at what comes immediately before
- * where appropriate, show how any background knowledge (eg. historical information, Old Testament references) helps us to interpret the passage
- * where appropriate, discuss any difficulties of interpretation
- * explain how significant words and phrases contribute to the effect of the passage

Full sentences should still normally be used, but note form will be permitted if time is running out.