

WHAT IS EXEGESIS?

The English word "exegesis" comes from a Greek word meaning 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 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.

In the following statement Gordon Fee uses the terms *exegesis* and *hermeneutics* 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 [the original hearers]. 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 a book Fee co-wrote with Douglas Stuart, called *How to Read the Bible for All it's Worth 2nd edition* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1993). You may have used a chapter of this book for an assignment completed as part of *New Testament Introduction* studies. 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 (i.e. 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 the assignments (with some brief attention to the second stage). In the examination you will not be expected to apply the text to today.

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. Various questions are to be asked.

THE LITERARY CONTEXT

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

The Psalter: The Psalter is different from other books of the OT in that it is a collection of 150 compositions by a variety of people. Each psalm had its distinctive origin. Therefore in the exegesis of a particular psalm you will not be expected to place it in the context of the Psalter as a whole or the psalms immediately surrounding it. You will however show how a part of a psalm relates to the psalm as a whole.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- * 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)?

Questions about date, place and purpose of writing are necessary but finding answers can be difficult.

- * 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?

The Psalms: The psalms mostly contain little historical information so that in most cases the date of writing and the historical circumstances giving rise to a psalm cannot be determined (two exceptions are Psalms 74 and 137).

Looking Closely at the Passage

Looking at the Literary and Historical context is important and is intended to help us understand the passage. *Always remember however to give primary attention to the passage itself.* In doing so, ask the following questions:

- * What is the main idea of the passage (or main ideas)? This is basic and remains important throughout.
- * Are there any words or phrases which need explaining? Are there any words or phrases which contribute strongly to the effect of the passage, and whose effect should be highlighted?
- * Are there any literary characteristics which need to be appreciated, such as parallelism, repetition (e.g. Psalm 46), imagery (e.g. the 'animals' attacking the psalmist in Ps 22), metaphors and similes?
- * 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?

The psalms frequently refer to God's creative work (eg Pss 8, 19, 136) and his actions in Israel's sacred history (e.g. Pss 114, 136).

- * Are there any difficulties of interpretation?

Sometimes the Hebrew is not clear. This is reflected in differences between the NRSV and the NIV. In the case of major ambiguity you will need to be aware of the various possibilities.

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

Contemporary relevance will not be asked for in the examination but is something we need to be asking throughout our study because this ancient text is now God's word to us.

Assignments: 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 or straitjacket for writing your exegesis. You will probably not need to deal with all the matters raised above, only those which are relevant to your passage.

Generally it is good to begin with a *brief* general comment on the passage. You will then **exegete the passage verse by verse**, using information assembled in answering the questions above as it becomes relevant. You might conclude with a *brief* general statement.

Full English 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 headed by the verse number or numbers (or quoted words).

So what does an exegetical essay 'look like'? Look at Anderson's commentary and the way in which the psalms are exegeted in these notes for a model.

Tools for the Task

Your main tools will be several good translations of the Bible and an appropriate number of good commentaries. The more literal translations, such as the NASB and NRSV, are particularly useful for close study of the Bible. 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 appropriate for exegetical work.

Tools which you will find useful for your OT and NT studies in general include:

- * a good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia, such as *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (4 vols., edited by G.W. Bromiley et al., Eerdmans, 1979-1988) or the *New Bible Dictionary* (1 vol., edited by I.H. Marshall et al., IVP, 1996)
- * a good Bible atlas such as the *New Bible Atlas* (ed. by J.J. Bimson et al., IVP, 1985). An atlas is essential for study of the OT.
- * a concordance to the translation you use most, such as *The NIV Complete Concordance* (edited by Goodrick and Kohlenberger, Hodder and Stoughton, 1981)

What About Exegesis in Exams?

The above instructions about exegesis are directed primarily at situations where there is reasonable time available and wide access to resources. But in an exam, time is limited and only a single translation of the Bible will be used. Concentrate on the essentials:

- * General introductory remarks. In the case of the Psalter these will cover:

the *genre*, structure, life setting and intention ('form-critical' matters).

the context: if exegeting part of a psalm discuss the relationship between the passage set and the psalm as a whole. In doing this **do not simply summarise the context**, look for links in words and ideas and how the passage fits into the message of the psalm.

Note: These introductory areas might occupy up to 20% of the completed answer.

* **explain the passage verse-by-verse.** *This is essential* and will ensure that you do not 'skip' verses (a common failing, particularly when lacking information). Obviously there will be more to say about some verses than others. As you do this the following matters will be dealt with (as relevant):

show how any background knowledge (e.g. historical information, OT references) helps us to interpret the passage

discuss any difficulties of interpretation

explain how significant literary features, words and phrases contribute to understanding the passage.

* comment on the meaning of the passage/psalm as a whole

I trust that this information has given you a clear picture of what is involved in the study of the Psalter. Come back to it from time to time so as to make sure that you are on track with requirements.

As we begin, the words of Psalm 1 are relevant:

Happy are those [whose] delight

is in the law of the LORD,

and on his law

they meditate day and night...

They are like trees

planted by streams of water

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