

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.

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* (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 (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 the assignments (with some brief attention to the second stage) and the examination.

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.

THE LITERARY CONTEXT

You need to ask:

- * How is the passage related 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?

For example, when exegeting Amos 1:3-5 we see that it is the first of a number of similar passages while 2:6-16 is the last of these passages. This will affect how we understand each passage. As another example read Amos 4:6-11 and jot down the literary feature. Then comment on how this helps you understand v 12.

We will now have a look at the confrontation in Amos 7:10-17 which reveals the animosity of the king and priest toward Amos. Read it through and then write a brief comment about the links with the message in vv 7-9:

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)?

Questions about date, place and purpose of writing arise but finding answers can be difficult for some of our questions. In the case of the prophetic books of the OT we can usually establish the historical background to the preaching of the prophet but it is more difficult to determine the date when his preaching was collected into the book we now have. We should not assume it was collected immediately or by the prophet himself. Fortunately this is not a matter of great concern for understanding the actual message. We will look at these matters when we come to Amos and Hosea.

- * 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, Amos and Hosea repeatedly attack Bethel, so it is important to know the history and significance of Bethel. You will need a Bible Atlas to understand Amos' attacks on the countries surrounding Israel (1:3-2:3). Amos preached during the reign of Jeroboam II so we need to know something about those times and about the rise of Assyria which is mentioned several times by Hosea.

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 main ideas)? This is basic and remains important throughout. In the case of the prophets this might be a warning of judgment, the sin of the people, a promise of restoration, a characteristic of God.
- * 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, words such as 'covenant', justice, holiness.

- * Are there any literary characteristics which need to be appreciated, such as repetition (eg Amos 4:6-11) or metaphors and similes (eg the animals and birds in Hosea 11:10-11; 13:8) or rhetorical questions (eg Amos 3:3-8)?
- * 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?

Amos and Hosea make frequent mention of Israel's sacred history (traditions) eg Amos 2:9-10; 3:1-2; 9:7; Hosea 12:2-4; 13:4-5). We need to explain the events and ask why the prophets mentioned them.

- * Are there any difficulties of interpretation?

There are a number of difficult verses in both prophets. This may be because the meaning of the Hebrew is not clear or because the statement has several possible meanings.

When the Hebrew is not clear as in Amos 8:14 we will work with the NIV. In the case of 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?

For example, the promise of restoration in Amos 9:11-15 is in sharp contrast to the rest of the book which declares that a devastating judgment is coming. It reveals that God's purpose is not to utterly destroy his people but to create a new people after judgment.

- * What does this passage say to us today?

This is something we need to be doing throughout our study because this ancient text is now God's word to us today. When a passage becomes significant to you, you might jot it down in your workbook. When you read Amos ch 1 you will soon recognise that you are reading about 'crimes against humanity' which continue to mark the modern world.

In the examination you will not be expected to comment on what the passage says to us today. This is not because it is unimportant but because it is asking too much from you under exam conditions to make significant contemporary application.

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. And they are not meant to dictate the structure of what you write.

Generally it is good to begin with a *brief* general comment on the passage, 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.

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 several good translations of the Bible and an appropriate number of good commentaries. The more literal translations, such as the NASB, RSV 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 generally 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). This is essential for 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 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 or after (the context). In doing this **do not simply summarise the context**, look for any links in words or ideas
- * look at the passage verse-by-verse. This will ensure that you do not ‘skip’ verses. Obviously there will be more to say about some verses than others.
- * 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. Do not deal with them in a separate section, include them in the verse-by-verse explanation.

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