

Guidelines for Writing an Exegesis Paper

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The Goal of Exegesis

An exegesis paper attempts to understand a passage in terms of its *original* context. Our goal in ministry is to apply the text to our *present* context. Application is not the same thing as exegesis. Nevertheless, exegesis must come first, if we as inspiring yet uninspired teachers are to make accurate applications to contemporary situations.

Organizing Your Paper

Exegesis is normally defined in terms of three contexts:

- Historical context
- Literary context
- Linguistic Context

There are characteristically a number steps involved in establishing each of these, and we will here deal with each of them in order. However, these contexts and steps are listed in an order, simply because it is impossible to describe them all in one breath. There is nothing sacred about the sequence, and each context and step may interact with other contexts and steps. *There may be better ways of organizing the final paper than just following the order below.* What is important is that the paper needs to exhibit a logical flow. By the end of the paper, you need to present a wholistic understanding of the passage, in accordance with how the first readers/listeners would have understood it. It should not be like a string of disconnected beads (as one lecturer describe an exegesis paper I did as an undergraduate student). It should instead be like a stew with the aromas of the different ingredients mixed together.

Use of Sources

The exegetical methodology here described is meant to give you a certain independence from commentaries and other sources. However, this fact does not release you from the need to interact with past commentators in your scholarship. You need to place your own work in its broader context, particularly working to establish your position on any *crux interpretum* or crucial point of interpretation that the passage may contain, as indicated by a survey of the relevant literature.

Of course, plagiarism should be avoided like the plague. Not only the sources for the words you use (in quotation marks, of course), but also the sources for the ideas must be clearly and accurately acknowledged at every step.

Establishing the Text

When placing a text in its original context, we must first have a reasonable idea of what the original text itself actually was. Manuscripts down through the ages may indicate various alternate readings. Some of these readings may have no impact on our understanding of the meaning of the text. In the case of difficult passages, emendations may even be suggested that are unsupported by any manuscript. The *Word Biblical Commentary* usually gives good information on text.

The Different Aspects of Context Studied as a Part of Exegesis

Historical Context

Who wrote the passage and when? What was happening at the time that casts light on why the author wrote, and what (s)he was trying to say? Are there aspects of day-to-day life or broad cultural context that cast light on the passage? What geographical features of the author's world casts light on the text?

Literary Context

Structure

What marks the passage out as a distinct unit from the material around it? In other words, why do you begin and end the exegesis where you do? How does the passage fit in with the rest of the book? The structure of the book does not need to be explained in detail; the broader structure is examined only to cast light on the specific passage. What is the internal structure of the passage? How should it be divided up, and what is the relationship between the parts?

It is especially important to examine the internal structure of the passage. In western cultures, structure is typically indicated by visual cues, like chapter divisions, headings, paragraphing, punctuation, and footnotes. These are typically put into English translations, but were no part of the original. In classical Hebrew, oral clues are most important.

It is all too easy to base structure specifically on content. Certainly, we might expect the different parts of a passage to have different content. However, the structure should illuminate our understanding of the content, rather than the other way around. Content thus ideally functions more as a way of confirming a structure than of initially formulating one.

Clues to a structural shift include a change of time or scene, a change of speaker, a change of grammatical subject, or a change in person (first, second, or third) or number (singular or plural). Rhetorical questions may indicate a significant shift in argumentation, and thus point to either the conclusion of one section or the beginning of another. Words like “now”, “for”, or “therefore” also tend to indicate conclusions or shifts. Inclusions indicate a returning to a beginning point.

It is not only necessary to divide a passage into its different sections, but to chart the interrelationship between the different parts. For example, when a structural shift occurs, we may need to ask whether we have a whole new section or simply a subsection. In a chiasmic structure, the most relevant portion of a passage to elucidate a particular issue may be far at the other end of it.

Genre

A genre consists of a type or category consisting of at least two pieces of literature, grouped together on the basis of shared characteristics. It is typically defined in terms of the form or structure of a piece of literature, its contents, and its purpose. Genre

may be broadly or narrowly defined. For example, all literature may be classified simply as part of the genre of literature. On the other hand, a genre could be developed on the basis of the common features of the two very similar passages, e.g., Pss 14 and 51. This genre might conceivably include no other pieces of literature in the world. The use of definitions for a genre that are too broad may not say much about a passage; the use of definitions that are too narrow may not help us see important interconnections to other passages. There is certainly an element of subjectivity in defining different genres, if not so much in the classification of an individual piece of literature in a defined genre. Those categories of genre classification that have survived do so because of their usefulness in understanding the literature involved. At the most basic level, we need to decide whether a passage is poetry or prose.

If the passage is poetic, we should remember that in contrast to English poetry, Hebrew poetry emphasizes *parallelism* or rhyming ideas more than it does rhyming sounds. Lines are set out in sets of two (known as *bicola*) or in sets of three (known as *tricola*). It is important to distinguish which elements are simply synonymous with a previous line or lines, and which parts are trying to add something new.

The purpose of genre classification is not to brand a passage then dismiss any further generic analysis. It is instead to open up our minds to the full potential of interpreting the passage.

Figures of Speech

As conservative readers, we are sometimes uncomfortable in reading any part of a text symbolically rather than literally. However, the truth is that we all use symbolism extensively even in the most ordinary of descriptions, as in the paragraph below, with italics added to indicate key figures of speech:

John sat at the breakfast table, *buried deeply* in the morning newspaper. Occasional *grunts and mutterings* informed Mary that her husband *was still alive behind the wall of newsprint*. She noticed *the teakettle was boiling* and removed it from the stove. While she wondered how she might *liberate* her husband from the City News, an idea slowly *dawned*. *Boiling water in hand*, she approached her husband *as if she were walking on eggs*. *The spout of the kettle took careful aim* between the lower edge of the paper and the edge of the table, beyond which lay *the peaceful and unsuspecting territory of John's lap*. "It's about time *city hall woke up*" were the last words John spoke before coming *fully and warmly awake* himself.¹

Definitions for some common literary techniques and figures of speech in the Bible appear below. Unless otherwise indicated, these are taken from the most relevant material in the respective entries of the New York published *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* (1992 edition). There is a point to providing such definitions. It is not so that the exegete can neatly categorize a figure of speech then ignore it. It is instead to open up the exegete's mind to the broad range of methods authors use to make convey their message.

¹William E. Mouser, Jr., *Walking in Wisdom: Studying the Proverbs of Solomon* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 82.

Allusion. A casual or passing reference to something, either directly or implied.²

Apostrophe. A digression in the form and address . . . to a personified object or idea.

Hendiadys. A figure of speech in which an idea is expressed by two nouns connected by *and* instead of a noun and modifier, as in *to look with eyes and envy* instead of *to look with envious eyes*.

Hyperbole. **1.** obvious and intentional exaggeration. **2.** an extravagant statement or figure of speech not intended to be taken literally, as “to wait an eternity.”

Hypercatastasis. Not actually in the *Random House College Dictionary*, but the term refers to something figuratively represented as something elsewhere, but implicitly rather than explicitly, as in simile or metaphor.

Merism. Again, this word is not found in the *Random House College Dictionary*, but it designates referring to a totality by mentioning extremes, e.g., in such biblical expressions as “heavens and earth” or “the ends of the earth”.

Metaphor. The application of a word or phrase to an object or concept it does not literally denote, suggesting comparison to that object or concept, as in “A mighty fortress is our God.”

Metonymy. The use of the name of one object or concept for that of another to which it is related or of which it is a part, as “scepter” for “sovereignty”.

Personification. The attribution of a human nature or character to inanimate objects or abstract notions.

Simile. A figure of speech in which two distinct things are compared by using “like” or “as,” as in “She is like a rose.”

Synecdoche. A figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole (such as the person who works to put “roof over his/her head”), or one member of a class is used to represent the whole group (such as the person who works to put “bread on the table,” when in fact it might have far more than bread on it).

Linguistic Context

²The point with allusion for exegesis is that brings material from another place into the context of your passage. Verbal parallels between passages are usually more significant than mere parallels of thought, and the more points of parallel the better, especially if there are few other such parallels in sight.

A key part of exegesis is the identification of the relevant ranges of meaning of key words in the original language. A Hebrew interlinear, analytical concordances, theological dictionaries, lexicons and indexes to lexicons are all valuable tools for this exercise. Words selected for word study should include rare words and words that are used recurrently throughout a passage. James Barr long ago gave a salutary warning that a word's etymology or original meaning is not always a decisive clue for its use in later contexts. Nevertheless, knowing something of the range of its meaning and of its use elsewhere can make an invaluable contribution to understanding the use of the word in your chosen passage.

Attention should be paid not only to a word's meaning, but also to the Hebrew syntax, i.e., to the grammatical relationships between words. For this it is valuable to look up one or more Hebrew grammars (see at the end of this document) and to note any references in the index to the passage that you are studying.

Pulling it Together

Once again, it should be emphasized that although you analyze different aspects of a passage, you need to pull your reading together into an overall whole. Some conclusions need to be drawn.

An exegesis paper is not the same as a sermon. Nevertheless, there must be a bridge between exegesis and application. You should therefore include a brief summary at the end of your paper about the way that you can apply what you have learned to your own life and the life of the community today.

Useful Sources on Exegetical Methodology (Placed on Desk Reserve in the Library)

Chisolm, Robert B, Jr. *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998.

Hayes, John H., and Holladay, Carl. *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook*. London: SCM, 1983.

Steck, Odil Hannes. *Old Testament Exegesis: A Guide to the Methodology*. Translated by James D. Nogalski. 2nd ed. Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1998.

Stuart, Douglas K. *Old Testament Exegesis: A Primer for Students and Pastors*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1884.

Thompson, John Lee. *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.³

³Exegesis is meant to help us step outside our own perspectives and to let us hear the word on its own terms as it was first given. The goal has not always been met. This book reminds us of how time-bound we all are, so that we will pursue it with even greater vigour!

Useful Hebrew Grammars

Jouön, Paul. *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*. Trans. & rev. T. Muraoka. Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblio, 1991.

Van der Merwe, Christo H. J.; Naudé, Jackie A.; and Kroeze, Jan H. *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*. Biblical Languages, Hebrew 3. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.

Waltke, Bruce K., and O'Connor, M. *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990.