Old Testament Exegesis, Fifth Edition

A Handbook for Students and Pastors

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Abbreviations

ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992)
ANET	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969)
ATLA	American Theological Library Association
BDB	Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907)
BH^{3}	*Biblia Hebraica*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1937)
BH^{5}	*Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (5th ed. of *BH*) (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 2004–)
BHQ	another abbreviation for *BH*^{5}
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (4th ed. of *BH*) (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1977)
CAD	*The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, ed. I. J. Gelb et al. (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1956–)
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran)
ed.	edited by/editor/edition
IDB	*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962)

ISBE	*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. G. W. Bromiley, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979–88)
IRBS	International Review of Biblical Studies
JSNT	Journal for the Study of the New Testament
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplements
MT	Masoretic Text
NIDOTTE	*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997)
NT	New Testament
OHB	Oxford Hebrew Bible
OT	Old Testament
OTA	*Old Testament Abstracts*
Q	Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls)
Quinta	another abbreviation for *BHQ*
repr.	reprint
rev. ed.	revised edition
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
TDNT	*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964–76)
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. J. Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green, 15 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974–2006)
TLOT	*Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. M. E. Biddle, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997)
TWOT	*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer Jr., and B. K. Waltke, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980)

Preface

Those few students and pastors who control several ancient and modern languages, read the scholarly literature regularly, and have already gained some confidence in their ability to do exegesis will certainly not need this primer. It is written for those who cannot read a Hebrew psalm at sight and who are not sure what "Vetus Testamentum" would mean or contain (the words mean "Old Testament" in Latin and are the title of a major OT scholarly journal). It is for those who have no idea what *homoioteleuton* might mean ("same kind of ending," a factor in certain textual problems). It is for the vast majority of all seminary students and pastors. It is predicated on the conviction that even the most intelligent people cannot understand procedures and concepts that are not somehow explained to them, and that there is no shame in seeking such explanations in spite of the fact that most seminary professors do not volunteer them. Old Testament exegesis has regular procedures and concepts, and these can be taught to almost anyone willing to learn. It is a tragedy that so few seminary students ever really feel sure of themselves in doing OT exegesis—and most pastors apparently abandon the practice altogether.

I have set out, therefore, to present a step-by-step guide to OT exegesis that will be nontechnical and simple without being simplistic, that will explain not only the procedures but also the goals of exegesis, and that will serve as a handbook for reference as the student or pastor does the actual work of exegesis.

My approach to exegesis has certain conscious biases for which I make no apologies. Perhaps the most debatable is my insistence that exegesis should include guidelines for application of the passage being studied. Exegesis is patently a theological enterprise, and a theology that is not

applied to the lives of God's people is sterile. For this reason, too, I have purposely deemphasized some of the critical techniques (e.g., structuralism, redaction criticism) which, though fascinating to the scholar, yield meager rewards theologically and are, in the final analysis, of minor value homiletically, much as that value judgment may displease some scholars. Likewise and for similar reasons, I have not given attention to various subjective hermeneutical approaches such as ethnic-based, gender-based, or life-status-based interpretational filters. I have tried to set a fair balance between synchronic and diachronic techniques (i.e., techniques concerned with the text as it stands [synchronic] and with the history of the developments that led to the text as it stands [diachronic]), but only insofar as these also hold promise of practical, theological benefit. The end of exegesis is preaching and teaching in the church. Seminary students and pastors know this instinctively and demand relevance from exegesis and other biblical studies, as well they should.

This primer recognizes that very few American students and pastors can read German or other scholarly languages. Of what advantage, therefore, is it to pretend that they can? The bibliographical guidance in chapter 4 is thus restricted as much as possible to English works.

A unique feature of this book is found in chapter 3, which outlines an abbreviated, limited-time exegetical format for pastors. At least in a general way, seminary students usually learn how to produce formal exegesis term papers, based on dozens of hours of research and writing. But no one tells them how they can transfer that ability to the weekly preaching task, where perhaps only *a few* hours may be available for the exegesis part of the sermon preparation. Exegesis can be done responsibly even if not exhaustively in a few hours' time. The pastor should first try to understand the fuller form of the guide in chapter 1. Chapter 3 represents a condensation and economization of the same material, with special attention paid to homiletical interests.

Those aspiring OT exegetes who know no Hebrew should still be able to make good use of the guidance given here—but there can be no denying that at least some knowledge of Hebrew is a precious advantage for student and pastor alike. I have done everything possible to encourage those whose Hebrew is weak to use it anyway. The helps discussed in chapter 4 can go a long way toward overcoming the disadvantages, especially via computer concordances that can instantly provide a range of Hebrew-English resources once found only at great effort. Indeed, the pastor who faithfully works from the biblical languages in sermon preparation, no matter how rusty one's knowledge of them may be at the start,

cannot help gaining more and more language mastery as time goes by. I hope this primer will encourage many to try.

For this fifth edition I have added, deleted, or further described many reference works, especially in chapter 4, so as to reflect what is actually available in print. I have also updated the listings of works that have appeared in new editions, and included additional information on electronic and online databases and other resources. Thus this fifth edition is substantially revised and expanded. I remain grateful to my students John Beckman and Robert Jennings, as well as my friend and particularly gifted librarian James Darlack, for their opinions on how best to describe the actual usage of some of the newer online bibliographic databases and publication repositories referred to in this latest edition. It is a joy to work with students and colleagues who love learning and want others to share their delight. I am also grateful to Julie Mullins, a kind, patient, and skillful editor, who has worked with me on behalf of a wonderful publisher, Westminster John Knox Press.

The widespread use of the first four editions, including their foreign language translations, has been very gratifying and is evidence of an ongoing hunger for preaching and teaching based accurately and confidently in the Scriptures.

Analytical Table of Contents (For Cross-Reference Use)

The reference system used in this book functions as follows:

4.1.7. refers to chapter 4, section 1, subsection 7 of this book.
Thus 4 (Exegesis Aids and Resources), 1 (Textual Criticism), 7 (The Masorah).
Likewise, 1.3.5. refers to chapter 1, section 3, subsection 5 (etc.).

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Introduction

An exegesis is a thorough, analytical study of a biblical passage done so as to arrive at a useful interpretation of the passage. Exegesis is a theological task, but not a mystical one. There are certain basic rules and standards for how to do it, although the results can vary in appearance because the biblical passages themselves vary so much.

To do OT exegesis properly, you have to be something of a generalist. You will quickly become involved with such things as the functions and meanings of words (linguistics); the analysis of literature and speech (philology); theology; history; the transmission of the biblical writings (textual criticism); stylistics, grammar, and vocabulary analysis; and the spiritually powerful application of biblical truth in real ways to the real lives of people.

Natural intuitive skills are helpful but no substitute for the hard work of careful, firsthand research. Exegesis as a process can be quite dull. Its results, fortunately, can often be exciting. Exciting or not, the results should always at least be of genuine practical value to the believer; if not, something is wrong with the exegesis. Although this book is a primer and hardly an exhaustive analysis of exegetical presuppositions or techniques, it ought to serve you well if your reason for learning exegesis is eventually to apply its benefits in Christian preaching or teaching.

If you do your exegesis properly, you and your audience will see three outcomes: accuracy, interest, and memorability. First, the matter of accuracy: Your sermons, lessons, and writing will be far more accurate if you invest the time and energy necessary to exegete a passage thoroughly. Good exegesis goes a long way toward overcoming laziness, sloppy thinking, lack of clarity in what you say or write, and outright error. That's because the process is designed to maximize objectivity as you seek to

understand a passage, by requiring you to work patiently through a series of steps designed to reduce your own preconceived ideas about what God's word is saying, any ignorance of the facts that would keep you from seeing the content correctly, and any tendency to jump to conclusions about what is actually being communicated in the words of the passage. This doesn't mean that you can guarantee perfect accuracy of understanding by means of exegesis. God alone has a completely objective picture of reality and a complete knowledge of all existence, and we cannot expect to match that. But we can seek to maximize the likelihood of gaining an accurate sense of what God has chosen to reveal to us and to minimize whatever subjectivity or unclear thinking that would interfere with appreciating what he has said in his Word. Thus all good exegetes, no matter how careful their efforts, also count heavily on the perspicuity of Scripture—the fact that its ultimate Author knows everything perfectly, including how to communicate perfectly in writing to human beings, so that we have a real chance to understand God's meaning in a true and useful way, even if our flaws and failures keep us from getting that meaning as fully and precisely as we wish. With the help of exegesis, a process designed to boost our own perspicacity—the ability to understand things—we will go much further in comprehending the divine word than without it. It's a little like driving a car: even if we can never do a perfect job of it, we can usually do well enough to get where we are going without getting into an accident. It doesn't happen automatically, but with reasonable effort, following reasonable rules, we can achieve a reasonable measure of success.

Additionally, good exegesis also leads to interest. What good is your sermon, lesson, or written piece if it is accurate but otherwise boring and arcane in format, so that your audience can't stay interested in it long enough to benefit from it? Here again, exegesis is an ally. The process, when followed through to its conclusion, invariably yields so much interesting information about a passage, including so much backgrounding and foregrounding perspective, that your own interest in the passage and its value for faith and practice will be heightened. In turn, you will naturally be eager to communicate as much of it as possible to your audience, who then will sense your excitement and tend to come to share it, as well as appreciate various insights that they would likely not themselves have had into the importance of the passage without the results of your exegetical work.

Finally, good exegesis increases memorability. An audience remembers what you have said or written better when it is grounded in rigorous, careful analysis. They remember better what they understand better, and

they also remember better what they are fully persuaded by. Exegesis provides persuasion by making sure that what you say to your audience is not dependent on mere persuasion but also on facts and arguments that help your audience see both why and how the passage is important to them. Moreover, since all roads lead to application in a good exegesis, your audience will be much better able to think about how they can put into faith and practice what they have learned from that passage—something they can't easily do if they haven't seen the nature and purpose of the passage clearly in the first place.

An exegete must work from many books and sources. Four kinds are especially valuable for the methodological and bibliographical guidance they contain relating to exegesis. You should own all four kinds, of which the following are presented as representative samples.

Note: For various reasons, it is disadvantageous for publishers to keep large stocks of books on hand indefinitely, as was once the normal practice. Now, books run out of print regularly and repeatedly. I try in this handbook to recommend only books and other sources that are currently available for purchase or otherwise accessible. To help make this evident to you, I sometimes list the date of a book's most recent printing or reprinting rather than its original publication date. This is not the strict, formal way to list books in a bibliography, but for the purposes of this book it is helpful.

Moreover, the technical web address (URL) of a given online resource can easily change without notice, so you may find that a URL listed here for a particular website may need to be ignored.

OT Introductions

Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2006).

Bill T. Arnold, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Miles Van Pelt, ed., *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

John Goldingay, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: Exploring Text, Approaches and Issues* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2016).

Any of these introductions contains lucid, concrete explanations of OT literary types and divisions, scholarly approaches, book-by-book content and criticism, canon, and text. Moreover, there is much to be gained from their bibliographical guidance.

A word of caution: don't make the mistake of thinking that the new is the true. In this volume I recommend resources that are currently in print and therefore widely available. But books written decades ago are sometimes better, and sometimes much better, than books recently published. An example from the list of OT introductions above is that of Harrison's *Introduction to the Old Testament*. It first appeared in the 1960s, and its bibliographies are dated, but its wisdom and erudition are not. In some ways, it is the best of the very fine group listed above. Good stuff is not limited to recent stuff. The human mind doesn't automatically work any better now than it used to.

OT Tools Overviews

Frederick W. Danker, *Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

Danker provides backgrounds, definitions, and explanations for all sorts of books, methods, sources, and styles in biblical exegesis. His work is a standard resource for such information.

Additionally, a considerable number of annotated listings of exegetical tools can be found online. Their comprehensiveness and judiciousness vary, but they usually contain at least some sources more recent than those listed by Danker. One of the best of these is

"Library Tools for Biblical Exegesis," published by the Duke University Divinity School Library (https://library.divinity.duke.edu/sites/default/files/2021-09/Library%20Tools%20for%20Biblical%20Exegisis.pdf).

Another is

"Reference Tools for Biblical Exegesis," published by Southern Methodist University (https://www.smu.edu/~/media/Site/Bridwell/Handouts/BiblicalExegesisReferenceTools.ashx).

By using such search wordings as "online tools for exegesis" or "tools for biblical exegesis" you can readily see the sorts of things that have been posted in this general vein.

OT Exegetical Handbooks

Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 4th ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

John W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

David M. Howard, ed., *Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006–) is a series that includes thirteen individual volumes focusing on broad OT genres; below are six of these volumes:

Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Interpreting the Historical Books: An Exegetical Handbook* (2006).

Edward M. Curtis, *Interpreting the Wisdom Books: An Exegetical Handbook* (2017).

Mark D. Furtado, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook* (2007).

Gary Smith, *Interpreting the Prophetic Books: An Exegetical Handbook* (2014).

Richard Taylor, *Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature: An Exegetical Handbook* (2016).

Peter Vogt, *Interpreting the Pentateuch: An Exegetical Handbook* (2009).

Handbooks can take various forms, but most offer basic explanations and definitions of terminology used in OT studies, as well as explanations of the sorts of basic procedures, perspectives, and concepts that you need to know to exegete intelligently within the genre or genres covered by the handbook. Most of the exegetical terms and techniques you will run across are explained. Some of them will also fill you in on trends and developments and sometimes even introduce you to various interpretational schools of thought.

Christian preaching and teaching demands attention to the New Covenant applicability of Old Covenant revelation, so an accurate appreciation of the NT's use of the OT is important. The following will prove useful to you in this task:

G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

Bibliographies

A classic example is:

Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *An Introductory Bibliography for the Study of Scripture*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Loyola University Press; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1990).

This is a good print book example of an annotated listing (but reaching only to 1990) of lexicons, texts, grammars, concordances, and other technical aids used by exegetes. This book shows what a judicious, carefully selected bibliography looks like. In other words, you should be careful not to be overly impressed by more exhaustive bibliographies that may appear online. Various online listings can contain a huge number of titles but give you almost no help in knowing which books or articles might be

worth reading or even owning and which are not. Anything an expert like Fitzmyer recommends for you is not to be overlooked or dismissed lightly.

Ronald H. Worth Jr., *Biblical Studies on the Internet: A Resource Guide*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008).

This print book resource is aging, and lacks evaluative annotations because it was intended to be a relatively exhaustive directory, listing almost five thousand sources. A version of it is available for download from the Internet Archive (https://archive.org/details/biblicalstudieso00wort).

Increasingly, bibliographies on resources for studying the Bible are moving online, where they can be updated frequently and inexpensively. Online listings can be focused in various ways, such as on the whole Bible or the whole OT, or more narrowly on a particular topic (e.g., biblical theology) or more narrowly still on a single canonical area or book. Below are some samples.

Widely used and a good starting place is:

Jean Louis Ska, "Old Testament Basic Bibliography" (https://www.biblico.it/doc-vari/ska_bibl.html).

Another example is Zondervan's focused listing of 101 books on biblical theology, especially useful by reason of its descriptive annotations for each book in the list:

Brittany D. Kim, Darian R. Lockett, and Charlie Trimm, "Books on Biblical Theology: An Annotated Bibliography" (https://www.zondervan.com/p/biblical-theology/bibliography/).

The following is a good example of a bibliographical posting on a single OT book, posted on the scholarly social media site Academia.edu (see 4.12.1 for further explanation of Academia.edu).

David Bouillon, "Bibliographie sur le livre de Jonas 1800–2014" / "Bibliography on the Book of Jonah 1800–2014" (https://www.academia.edu/31144882/Bibliography_on_the_Book_of_Jonah_1800_2014_).

We discuss more of these in chapter 4, where we also discuss large bibliographical databases and how to use them.

With these four kinds of texts in hand, you will know what the issues in exegesis are, what kind of resources are available, and where to find

them. In addition to these four sorts of books, you ought to have in your library, either in book form or electronic form or both, a "critical" edition of the Hebrew OT. For the time being, the one you want will be the *BHS*, the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (the fourth edition of a carefully edited Hebrew Bible published in Stuttgart, Germany). It has replaced the older *BH*^{3} (the third edition, also known by the name of its main editor as the "Kittel") just as it will, in time, be replaced by the fifth edition, *BHQ* (*BH*^{5}) or *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*. The *Quinta*, like its predecessors, uses the Leningrad Codex of AD 1008 as its basis, with its text carefully checked against photographs of that codex taken in the 1990s. Unlike its predecessors, however, it includes a commentary explaining the Masorah (the medieval Jewish text notational system) and discussing the significance of the textual variants it gives in its footnotes. Moreover, it contains the Masorah magna (a compendium of medieval Jewish text notes), which was available only via a supplementary volume in the case of the *BHS*. Controversially, its editors cite relatively few variants from other medieval Hebrew manuscripts since the editors are convinced that such variants are of little value. This represents a deficiency in the *BHQ*, so don't dispense with your *BHS*. A real plus for most students is the fact that the *BHQ* introductions, notes, and comments are in English, as opposed to Latin in the case of the *BHS*.

The *BHQ* books of Ruth, Canticles, Qoheleth, Lamentations, and Esther appeared in a fascicle published in 2004; Ezra and Nehemiah appeared in 2006, and Deuteronomy in 2007. The entire *BHQ* was originally scheduled gradually to be completed in 2017 but as of the printing of this book, the following fascicles are still in preparation: Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Psalms, and Daniel.

You will surely want to have at hand also a Hebrew-based concordance, a Hebrew lexicon, a Hebrew grammar, a comprehensive history of Israel, a Bible dictionary, and a scholarly, original-language-based commentary series (if possible). Any and all of these are available in both electronic and book form. Examples of the specific works are discussed in chapter 4. The concordance, history, dictionary, and commentary series are essential even if you do not know Hebrew. Without the proper tools, an exegesis cannot go far. The more of these sorts of works you have via computer software, including online access, the faster your exegesis work can go because of the time saved in searching. On the other hand, speed is not always an advantage: searching through a book forces you to see things in context in a way that searching via search engines often

prevents you from doing. Nevertheless, any resources you can purchase via Accordance or Logos will likely be cheaper and easier to use than the alternatives.

Remember as you use this guide that all the steps do not apply equally to all OT passages. For example, some passages will require major attention to historical issues and little attention to their form or vocabulary; others will be just the opposite. There is no way to be sure of this automatically in advance. As you become familiar with a passage, it will tend to become obvious to you how to assign the relative weight of each step and the subpoints thereof.

This primer is organized into four sections. Chapter 1 provides a nontechnical format for extensive, formal exegesis projects including, but not limited to, term papers. Chapter 2 gives illustrations for the steps of an extensive exegesis. Chapter 3 gives a simple, condensed version of the longer format and centers especially on sermon preparation. Chapter 4 discusses various exegetical aids and resources, especially bibliographical, including how to access them and how to use them.