Biblical Exegesis

A Beginner's Handbook

Fourth Edition

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Preface to the Fourth Edition

Since the appearance of the third edition in 2007, much has happened. Most notable has been the death of my close friend and colleague John Hayes (1934–2013), of blessed memory, whose vision, wisdom, and vast knowledge and experience as an Old Testament scholar shaped the conception and production of this handbook for beginning exegetes. From the outset, he insisted that the book should cover both the Old and New Testaments so that it would benefit students taking college and university courses introducing the entire corpus of Jewish and Christian writings that are read as "the Holy Bible" in many different settings. But he also wanted to write a book that would serve students in seminaries and divinity schools who were preparing for ministry in its various forms. Above all, he insisted that the book should be written in clear, understandable English prose—"Reader's Digest English," he called it. It was to be a book for beginners who are learning about exegesis for the first time.

The field of biblical studies has changed since the book first appeared in 1982. New discoveries have been reported, new methods of interpretation have been developed and refined, and new levels of awareness have emerged within and among Bible readers and those who teach and interpret it. The scholarly guilds relating to biblical studies and ancillary fields such as archaeology have expanded and flourished, as have the publishing programs of many church-related and university presses.

In this fourth edition, I have sought to retain what has made this handbook useful to its many readers over the years—its simplicity, straightforward approach, and practical suggestions for doing Bible study and writing exegesis papers for academic settings. An effort has been made to retain chapters that still represent viable approaches to exegesis and that help students understand what they will find in biblical commentaries, scholarly journals, and other study resources such as Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias. I have also sought to revise and expand chapters, taking into account new approaches that have received attention over the past two decades. Rather than adding a line or paragraph here and there, I have gone through the entire third edition, attempting to update it, adding, cutting, and revising as appropriate. I have fully revised chapter 11, which is now titled: "Exegesis: Identity and Advocacy." The chapter on "Exegesis: The Art of Seeing" is entirely new. This chapter represents my thinking on exegesis as it developed toward the end of my teaching career at Emory. I have also updated the bibliographies, now with dates of publication in chronological sequence. An asterisk marks items especially recommended as additional reading for beginning students. The term *online* includes works that can be consulted online and those that can be obtained as e-books. Also updated is the appendix on "Using Electronic Technologies in Exegesis." As before, I well understand that some of this information on software packages and websites and the internet will be out-of-date when this fourth edition is published, but users, especially those with electronic savvy, can make the needed adjustments easily enough. This appendix still provides useful information for beginning students, and even for more advanced students and scholars.

I want to thank Richard Wright (Abilene Christian University), along with Brady Beard and Zane McGee (both at Emory University), for their assistance in revising the appendix on electronic technologies. Also a word of appreciation to Robert Brawley, Claude Cox, and Paul Watson for offering helpful suggestions at several points.

As before, I am grateful to Westminster John Knox Press for our partnership over the years, and especially to its editorial staff, most notably Dan Braden, S. David Garber, and Julie Tonini, for their resourcefulness and commitment to high standards of scholarship relating to the Bible.

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Durham, North Carolina
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Preface to the Third Edition

When this book originally appeared in 1982, there were few such handbooks available. Since then, several have been published. Some focus on doing exegesis of either the OT or NT. Others presuppose knowledge of Hebrew or Greek. Still others provide detailed, step-by-step "how-to" instructions. Some are collections of essays by scholars treating different approaches to exegesis.

From the outset, we thought an exegetical handbook should treat both the OT and NT; provide simple, helpful information and guidance about doing exegesis, without being overly prescriptive; introduce students to various methods succinctly; provide basic bibliography that would take students beyond our introductory discussion; and emphasize exegesis as an everyday activity based on commonsense principles rather than as an esoteric academic discipline.

Over the years, our approach seems to have worked. Our book has been used in undergraduate Bible survey classes, in seminary courses—both OT and NT introductions and exegesis courses on individual biblical books—and in various church settings. It has also been used in high schools. It has had a wide reach internationally. Readers seem to appreciate that it is substantial but nontechnical, comprehensive but not inordinately lengthy, helpful but not pushy, and readable.

In our second edition (1987), we retained the format of the first edition but included new chapters on structuralism and canonical criticism. In this third edition, we have retained all the chapters of the second edition and added a new chapter, "Exegesis with a Special Focus: Cultural, Economic, Ethnic, Gender, and Sexual Perspectives" [see chap. 11 of 4th ed.]. We have been selective, not comprehensive, realizing that much has occurred over the last twenty years. We do think, however, that these new perspectives illustrate some of the most important developments.

The appendix, "Using Electronic Technologies in Exegesis," acknowledges the technological revolution that has occurred since our book first appeared. Over the years, we have accommodated to these new technologies in our teaching. Mainly, we have learned from our students, who know far more about these things than we do. Rather than including this appendix as another chapter, along with other chapters that discuss exegetical approaches and methodologies, we have located it at the end of the book. We do this, not because we think it is less important, but to signal that we regard these new technologies as new tools that can benefit us in any approach that we use. Here again, we have tried to make our treatment simple, informative, accurate, and helpful. Knowing how rapidly technology changes, we realize that some of this information will be dated when the book appears. Even so, we believe our observations will remain true over the foreseeable future.

Besides adding this new material, we have worked through the second edition completely. We have retained some of it, reworked other parts, and completely rewritten still other parts. The result is a thoroughly revised book. We have tried to retain the simple, uncluttered style that commended the earlier editions. Yet we have added some details and examples that we believe give more texture to our discussion. We have updated and expanded all the bibliographies. Because the field of biblical studies has grown enormously over the last twenty years, we decided to include only books in the bibliographies. Removing some of the articles was a painful decision, since several of them were seminal in their own right. The bibliographical data provide the names of the current or latest publication of a work. Dates in parentheses are those of the original publications [dates are in sequence in 4th ed.].

Along the way, we have accumulated debts, mainly to our students. Derek Olsen scanned the second edition and reworked and updated it. He contributed the core draft of the appendix on computer technology. Since his initial draft, however, John Weaver and Richard Wright of Pitts Theology Library have made further refinements. Eric Barreto and Kevin Muñoz also shared with us their considerable knowledge of computer technology and wrote some of the new sections. Amanda Stephenson read through the entire draft and provided many helpful editorial suggestions, which we followed. In the last stages, Bo Adams generously shared his impressive knowledge and experience of computer and internet technology, in addition to performing a lot of the grunt work on bibliography, diagrams, and general editing. Peter Trudinger extended a helping hand in the final process. Drew Denton, Jason Bethel, and Robert Williamson Jr. also assisted in the final editing, especially in preparing the indexes.

We are especially indebted to the students we have taught over the last thirty or so years at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. It has been a special delight for us to introduce the Bible to them, spark their interest in exegesis, and teach them different approaches to biblical interpretation. We think they are better interpreters of the Bible because of our efforts. Whatever form their exegetical efforts take—and many of them have become ministers in local churches—we think those who hear them teach and preach are better off. At least, we hope so.

JHH
CRH
June 30, 2006
Atlanta, Georgia

Abbreviations

ANE	Ancient Near East
ASV	American Standard Version
AV	Authorized Version (King James Version)
BCE	Before the Common Era
BDAG	Bauer-Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*
CBGM	Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (of textual criticism)
CE	Common Era
Cn	Correction
CSAD	Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents (Oxford University)
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
ESV	English Standard Version
Gk.	Greek
GNT 5	Greek New Testament, 5th edition
Heb.	Hebrew
ISSN	International Standard Serial Number
J, E, D, P	Sources used in compiling the Pentateuch
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, along with other writings
MS-DOS	Microsoft Disk Operating System
MT	Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible
NA 28	Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th edition
NAB	New American Bible

NABRE	New American Bible, Revised Edition
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NJPS	*Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New Jewish Publication Society Translation* according to the Traditional Hebrew Text
NKJV	New King James Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
PC	Personal computer
Q	Quelle, hypothetical sayings source used by Matthew and Luke
Q Ms	Qumran manuscript
REB	Revised English Bible
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
Syr	Syriac
Tanakh	Acronym for the Jewish Bible: Torah (Pentateuch), Nevi'im (Prophets), Kethuvim (Writings)
Tg	Targum(s)
TLG	Thesaurus Linguae Graecae, electronic catalog of ancient Greek literature
UBS	United Bible Societies
UBS 5	United Bible Societies, *Greek New Testament*, 5th edition
URL	Uniform (or Universal) Resource Locator; address of an internet resource
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

Chapter One

Introducing Exegesis

Interpretation Using Everyday Skills

Exegesis can be understood at two levels: in a general sense, as the explanation of a text, and in a more restricted sense as the critical interpretation of a text. This distinction suggests that any text, no matter how simple and straightforward, can be explained, even if its meaning is fairly self-evident. But it also recognizes that some texts are more complicated: because their meaning is not so clear, they require closer, more careful reading. This usually implies that some specialized knowledge, or experience in reading such texts, is required in order to provide an informed interpretation of the text. Someone might say, perhaps in reference to a legal text or some other complicated document, "We'll have to do an exegesis of this text to understand what it means." Such a comment suggests that a different level of reading is necessary and that the interpreter will need some special expertise relating to the subject matter.

The etymology of "exegesis" reflects some of these ambiguities. The term is derived from the Greek verb *exēgeomai*, a compound word formed from the verb *hēgeomai*, "to lead," and the preposition *ex*, "out." In ancient Greek it can mean "show one the way to" or "lead the way," but it sometimes means "expound" or "interpret." Socrates speaks of "expounding [*exēgeomai*] the things Homer says" (Plato, *Ion* 531A). Plato uses the noun form *exēgēsis* when referring to "exposition of the laws" (*Laws* 631A). In Herodotus, the term "exegete" (*exēgētēs*) is someone who interprets oracles, dreams, or omens (*Histories* 1.78).

Exegesis may be a highly specialized interpretive process carried out by experts, yet it usually involves forms of reasoning and commonsense principles that we employ every day. It is helpful to think about exegesis as part of the broader activity of communication in which we all participate. When someone speaks to us, we must listen to what they say and decide what they mean. We usually interpret their words instinctively, even unconsciously. We may ask ourselves: "Is it a question or a statement? Should we take the words literally? Are they joking or being serious? Does their language reflect well-established 'templates' of speech? Is it in the form of a greeting, a sales pitch, a lecture, a sermon, or a threat? How should we respond? Smile and return the greeting? Be skeptical and resist? Take notes? Be open and responsive? Hand over our purse or wallet?"

Because we spend so much time speaking and listening, we ask such questions intuitively. We realize that facial gestures and body language may communicate as much as spoken words, perhaps more. As we interpret a "speech act," we trigger a multifaceted, complex range of responses that may seem second nature to us. We may not even give much conscious attention to how we respond. Even so, when we participate in such acts of interpersonal communication, we are using our exegetical skills.

Oral communication generally takes place in familiar situations with persons we know. This enables us to assess the context and intentions of the speaker as well as to analyze the spoken words themselves. The context helps us determine the larger social framework in which the communication event takes place and thus to understand the words spoken. Is someone in an official position giving commands, offering directions, supplying information, or making suggestions? Are the words spoken in a formal, highly structured situation, or is the setting more casual? Is the communication part of a wedding ceremony or a conversation between friends at a bar? Were the words spoken under normal or abnormal conditions? Engaging in oral communication involves more than paying attention to a speaker and listener—the communicators. It also requires us to understand the context in which their words are spoken.

Although some of these dynamics are also present in written communication, some important differences appear between oral and written communication. Since the writer is generally not present when we read a written text, the words assume a greater importance than with oral communication. Through imagination and prior knowledge, we may re-create in our mind a picture of the writer and the situation in which the text was written. If we receive a letter from a friend, we have prior knowledge about the person. We often know something about the situation in which the letter was written. But even when we read a letter from someone we know, we engage in exegesis. We may know the letter writer intimately, but we still need to interpret the written words to understand what is said. The written text is the medium through which we interpret the person's words and seek to understand what is being communicated.

At a minimum, interpreting written texts presupposes that the writer and the reader share a common world, a common frame of reference, and a common understanding of language. To this extent, the writer and the reader are not remote from one another.

And yet, we interpret many written communications in which we have little or no knowledge about the writer. In such cases, the act of interpretation occurs primarily between the text and the reader. Unlike the speaker in oral communication, the writer becomes less important.

When we read a highway sign or a traffic direction, it matters little who wrote these words. What matters is that the reader and the words on the sign share a common linguistic field of reference. It is only necessary that the written directions or the symbols painted on the sign make sense to the reader and lend themselves to exegetical understanding. But even highway signs may require interpretation. If we see a sign that reads "Road Construction 1500 Feet," does this mean that for the next 1,500 feet, or after traveling 1,500 feet, a driver should expect construction activity? Even this seemingly simple written message requires exegesis. Meaningful interpretation depends upon prior experience in understanding such signs.

We constantly read and interpret multiple forms of written texts. On any given day, we may read an assignment in a scientific textbook, a short story, a poem, a label on a food container, announcements of meetings and other events, a newspaper, a letter, an advertising brochure, or a traffic sign. All these texts employ different forms of communication. They also represent different literary forms, or genres, of written documents. Since these texts are part of our normal culture, we have been socialized into how to read and understand them in spite of their diversity. We do not read and interpret a poem as we would a recipe. In a poem we expect metaphorical language; in a recipe we want simple, straightforward instructions. Neither do we read the front page of a newspaper in the same way we read the editorial page.

In our culture, some types of writing require close, intensive exegetical work. Every profession has a body of specialized, technical literature that must be mastered and constantly consulted. Lawyers and judges spend much of their time interpreting laws and law codes. Such exegesis typically requires legal experts to examine how laws have been interpreted and applied in the past. So important are these previous rulings that the history of interpretation of laws is a central element in the legal profession. In particular, constitutional lawyers specialize in the exegesis of the constitution and the history of its interpretation.

The same is true of other professions. For accountants, tax codes are the definitive texts that must be interpreted and applied. In the health care professions, scientific articles in specialized journals, along with standard textbooks on different topics, constitute the texts that inform daily medical practice. Diplomatic language and treaties often require special exegesis since communication in this area is frequently sensitive and deliberately ambiguous.

What is required for the interpretation of written texts varies greatly, depending upon the nature of the texts and their relationship to normal communication. Some texts merely need to be read to be understood. Others require detailed analysis. Some use normal, everyday language, grammar, and sentence structure. Others use specialized vocabulary, involved grammatical and sentence structure, and distinctive forms of expression. Some texts employ symbolic and metaphoric language. Others employ language that severely limits the range of meaning, thus reducing the potential for multiple interpretations and misunderstanding. Some texts seek to clarify; others are intentionally obscure. Some texts seek to persuade; others seek merely to inform. Some texts are written to entertain; others are written to cause sober reflection.

Some other aspects of written speech are also worth noting. Once words are written down, they take on a different quality. Our eyes focus on letters that form words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Punctuation comes into play as a whole set of non-letter markings helps us process how to read the words. These include periods, commas, semicolons, colons, dashes, exclamation points, question marks, and quotation marks. Capital and lowercase letters introduce further nuances. Spaces—the absence of any markings—are also important in written speech, and we learn to interpret their significance. We take note of space between sentences or indented space to signal the beginning of a new paragraph.

Ever since the invention of the printing press, interpreting printed texts has posed special problems. But with the invention of computers, the internet, and smart phones, along with the many innovations in communication that accompanied this technological revolution, we have witnessed some fundamental changes. We have relearned that spaces are not required in a string of letters in order to communicate a message; or that a string of letters followed by .com or .org should be read a certain way. We now instinctively grasp the meaning of https://customerservice.starbucks.com without having to separate the words and insert spaces between them. A whole new set of abbreviations has entered the picture—BTW, FYI, NRN, and so on. But these also require interpretation. Does LOL mean "Laugh Out Loud" or "Lots Of Love"?

With the incorporation of digital images, both still and video, yet another layer of interpretive possibilities has been added. This was also true earlier, beginning with illuminated manuscripts and the use of lithographs and copper engravings in printed Bibles. Readers not only read printed texts; they also view accompanying images illustrating and interpreting the written text. The extensive use of images in social media stretches the interpretive demands even further. Readers now process information on screens displaying printed words and phrases, numerous abbreviations, and illustrative images. An emoji can be used to decorate text messages for special emphasis, or a single message might even consist almost entirely of emojis. Here again, interpretation may be required. What's the difference between a "thumbs up" and "clapping hands"?

Rather than simplifying the task of interpretation, these innovations and expansions have created new challenges. When a quotation is attributed to a political figure or celebrity, we know that it may have been modified or taken out of context. We have learned to be suspicious rather than take such reports at face value. The same goes for videos reporting some event. Does it display "what actually happened," or has it been edited to slant the scene? Such "photographic records" need to be interpreted critically, as has always been the case with conventional printed texts. If anything, these technological innovations have underscored the need for exegesis, which entails close, critical reading of various forms of communication, whether oral or written, printed or digital.

For many people, interpreting the Bible still involves reading a text on a printed page. This may be pieces of paper in a bound volume or an electronic text on a smart phone or computer screen. Such a reader may be aware of the countless forms of digital Bibles, along with scores of electronic study tools and databases available on the internet or in software packages that one can purchase. But even with this plethora of electronic resources that now supplement conventional libraries, with the many shelves of bound books and journals, the process of interpretation is essentially the same: readers trying to make sense of a cluster of letters and spaces that appear before our eyes.

Whether we are interpreting oral or written communications, two variables come into play: (1) the commonality of experience and language between a speaker and listener, or between a writer and reader; and (2) the technical level of the language.

One of the most important considerations in communication is whether the sender (speaker, author, or editor/collector) and the receiver (hearer or reader) share a common world of discourse and experience. When two people sharing a common background talk with each other or exchange letters, few, if any, problems of communication occur. But when their manner of speaking and range of experiences differ, it is more difficult for them to understand each other.

Two people from a similar rural environment usually experience little difficulty communicating with each other. The same is true with those from a similar urban environment. But misunderstanding often occurs when a city dweller and a rural inhabitant try to communicate with each other. So different are their ranges of experiences and their ways of speaking that it may be nearly impossible for them to understand each other. To explain this communication breakdown, we sometimes say that they live in two different worlds.

A second consideration is whether the communication involves specialized content. This point can be illustrated by using examples from letter writing. Personal letters, one of the most common means of personal communication, are generally written in a simple, straightforward manner. Such letters may vary in content and form depending upon the degree of familiarity between the sender and receiver and upon what is being communicated. It usually takes little effort to understand letters from a friend, parent, or child. But a technical letter from an engineer describing some mechanical or chemical process, or from an accountant explaining a bookkeeping procedure, is a different matter. An essay on Paris in the springtime would probably present fewer interpretive problems than an essay on the influence of Renaissance architecture on nineteenth-century building construction in Paris.

Although email may have replaced letter writing as one of the most common forms of communication, familiarity between sender and receiver, plus levels of complexity, remain important considerations. When two friends email each other, their language, usually simple and straightforward, may even include numerous abbreviations such as ASAP or NMP. Signatures may be decorated with various emojis such as smiling faces, a string of hearts, or a series of X's and O's. But emails can also be more formal, such as communication between colleagues at work or between business associates. As with letters, an email may contain complex, technical information, perhaps sent from one engineer to an entire research and development team. In this case, technical expertise is presupposed among the email audience. The use of attachments introduces yet another level of variation and complexity. Knowledge of conventions relating to email is also necessary in interpreting this form of communication. A sentence typed in solid caps and displayed in red conveys special emphasis; italicized print can call attention to terms of special significance.

Important Considerations Relating to Exegesis

As we have seen, exegesis may have a technical focus, but it also involves interpretive skills and forms of reasoning that we use in our normal, everyday lives. A lot depends on the level of familiarity between those who are communicating with each other; equally significant is the relative difficulty of what is being communicated. Yet there are some additional considerations that should be noted.

Third-Party Perspective

Sometimes the interpreter is a direct addressee—someone included among the original circle of readers or hearers addressed by the sender. But often this is not the case. The interpreter may be a third party, not a direct receiver of the communication. If so, the interpreter may be trying to understand not only the message of the text itself but also the viewpoint of both the sender and receiver. Here, the third party can be thought of as an outside observer, an intruder who is "listening in" on someone else's conversation.

Letters pose special interpretive challenges when they are being read by a third party. The persons involved in the original communication may be totally unknown to the interpreter. Generally, most documents are best understood when the sender has some prior knowledge of the receiver and the receiver has some prior acquaintance with the sender. By imagining how the communication will be received and understood, the sender can shape the message accordingly. Similarly, the receiver can imagine the sender in order to understand better both the content and the shape of the communication.

To understand a communication between two other parties, a third-party reader must imagine, even empathize with, both the sender and the receiver. In one sense, the third-party interpreter must assume the identities of sender and of receiver, then read the document from these perspectives.

The third-party interpreter first assumes the role of the sender, then that of the receiver, and out of this imagined situation tries to understand the communication between them. This requires the interpreter—the third party—to search out information or use informed imagination about both the sender and the receiver and their situations. When the content or form of the document is specialized, unique, or ambiguous, this process is even more necessary and imposes greater demands.

Communication in a Different Language

Further complexity is introduced when a text is composed in a language different from that of the interpreter or exegete. In this situation a language barrier enters the interpretive or exegetical process. If an English-speaking person receives a letter written in German, or wishes to read a German-language textbook, special problems arise. The English-speaking person must acquire sufficient knowledge of German to read the text or resort to a translator who can aid in overcoming the language barrier. In either case, ascertaining the meaning of something written in another language is not always easy. Since each language has its own distinctive structure, grammatical features, and vocabulary nuances, it is difficult for a translation to convey exactly what the original language expresses. It is widely recognized that translation inevitably involves interpretation.

Once a text is translated into another language, this introduces another level of complexity. Interpreting a text translated into another language might be called second-level interpretation. A first-level interpretation occurs when a text is read in its original language. This might be done by a native speaker or hearer or by someone who has acquired enough knowledge of the original language. A second-level interpretation occurs when an interpreter seeks to understand the content of a translation. At this level, the interpreter is always one step removed from the original, regardless of how well the text has been translated. When we interpret texts that have been translated from another language, we inevitably confront a communication gap, however small, between what the translation says and what the writer originally expressed.

Cultural Differences

Writings produced in one cultural context and interpreted in another setting present special problems. A document may mention, describe, or allude to special ideas, practices, and customs that would be clearly understood by a person from the original culture who is reading the document. But a reader from a different culture may be completely baffled by what is being described. Communication within a culture frequently assumes a shared body of cultural understanding. This general reservoir of experience, worldview, and perception informing the text would not be shared by the cultural outsider. A document reporting the actions and outcome of a specific sporting event, say a baseball game or a cricket match, would be difficult to understand for a person living in a culture in which the sport and its rules of play are unknown.

Differences in culture are not related just to ideas, concepts, and worldviews. Also included are differences in the way things are said and written, in the customary way of reading and interpreting. In some cultures, when someone tells a story, the first character to be mentioned is always the villain. Someone from within that culture would know this immediately without needing to be told or "clued in." Generally, the more remote the culture reflected in a given text, the greater the difficulty the exegete encounters in interpreting it.

Historical Distance

When we study a document from the past, we must mentally shift from our own time to an earlier period. The chronological gap between the reader and the text being interpreted does not need to be great for interpretive difficulties to arise.

Reading a fifty-year-old newspaper can be fascinating. We quickly notice differences in clothing fashions, in prices for advertised items, in issues that were the concerns of the day, and in the style in which articles were written. Questions immediately arise. Why were things that way? Why were certain issues and events considered important? How could prices have been so low? How could people have thought and reacted the way they did?

When we read documents from the more distant past—from the ancient Near East or from the time of ancient Greece and Rome—we often encounter persons, places, practices, and perspectives that are a "world apart" from our present situation. This is why editions of ancient classics often contain notes that explain historical persons, events, or customs familiar to persons who lived at that time but are no longer part of our modern frame of reference.

Writings That Developed over Time and Collective Authorship

Exegesis is sometimes more complicated because the texts being interpreted are the products of collective authorship and historical growth. Simply put, this means that a text may not have been written by a single author at a particular time—in one sitting, as it were. Rather than being produced by one person, it may have been written or edited by multiple authors. This is collective rather than individual authorship. By historical growth, we mean that a writing may have been composed over a long period of time rather than at one specific point in time.

Many writings in our own culture result from collective authorship and historical growth. The United States Constitution, for example, was produced by a constitutional convention. Many people contributed to its composition, and there were many preliminary drafts. Over time, the original document has been expanded through adding amendments.

We are all familiar with different editions of textbooks. Often a textbook will be written by one author and then revised by the original author or perhaps by a second author. The later revisions may make it impossible to distinguish original material from what was added later. Unless we have access to the separate editions, we cannot easily detect the different strata of editorial composition.

College and university catalogs typically reflect collective authorship that has occurred over a period of time. Usually, different people have written different sections, and these have gone through many editorial revisions. Some of the information in the latest catalog may have been there since the first catalog was published by the school. Other items may have resulted from recent policy decisions. If a researcher wished to explore the development of the school's policies and curriculum but possessed only the current catalog, it would be difficult. By comparing the current catalog with earlier editions and information gained from other sources, we could draw firmer conclusions. By looking at editorial changes between editions, we could determine when courses in computer science or women's studies were introduced or when coeducational dormitories became permissible.

In the ancient world, books were often produced through collective authorship. Even in medieval times, writers often avoided originality. Instead, they frequently combined older works that had already been compiled and edited from previous works. Ancient works were frequently the products of a long and complex editorial process. Even though the finished work might appear to be a single, unified whole, its content might consist of layers of materials and traditions from different sources and chronological periods. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus (ca. 37–100 CE) utilized assistants in his writing, which means that some of his works were really the product of a joint effort. In addition, he frequently incorporated or rewrote earlier sources without acknowledging that he was actually doing so, or without naming his sources. But in fairness to Josephus and many other ancient authors, it should be recognized that borrowing the work of one's predecessors was fairly common practice in ancient times. Our sensitivity about property rights of individual authors and how these are protected by copyright laws is more typical of modern times.

Even today, term papers written in academic settings are often composite. We quote words and borrow ideas from others. When we do so, we are expected to acknowledge our sources in footnotes to indicate that we are drawing on previous work as we develop our interpretations.

When working with ancient writings, we can usually detect the results of this process of growth and historical development by locating literary "seams" in the material—places where different blocks of material have been patched together. Other indicators of editorial activity include the presence of anachronisms in the text. If a text mentions an event or practice that obviously belongs to a period later than the one in which the author supposedly wrote, the reader instinctively senses that something is amiss—that someone other than the implied author wrote or edited that part of the text at a later time. Differences in literary style, and even internal contradictions within the text, may also suggest different levels of authorship. Interpreters of ancient texts are constantly aware that a given writing may have resulted from collective authorship and editorial activity and that it is necessary to take these considerations into account in their exegetical analysis.

Another consideration should be noted about literary productions in antiquity. Works were sometimes produced as if they were the work of another person, generally some venerable figure from the past. Writers would produce a work and attribute it to a person of the remote past, or perhaps even to someone close to their own time. Such writers possibly thought they were expressing the views of the one under whose name they wrote, maybe even preserving some authentic material from that person. Since these works were ascribed to one person but were actually written or edited by someone else, they are known as pseudepigraphs (the broader literary practice or phenomenon is called pseudepigraphy).

Such works could be produced by students or followers of important figures in order to pass on the legacy of their teacher. Works produced in this way tended to be associated with, and attributed to, the revered personality rather than to the person's students or followers. Some philosophical treatises that were attributed to the eminent Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) are now known to have been written many years after his death, often by his own students.

Written works attributed to a revered figure of the past possessed an aura of authority. We see this in the large body of literature that was written under the name of Enoch, to whom the Bible gives only incidental notice (see Gen 4:17–18; 5:18–24). None of these Enochian writings made its way into the Scriptures, although they are referred to in the NT book of Jude (vv. 14–15). Generally the pseudepigraphic quality of such works can be detected by analyzing their literary and linguistic features, along with their purported and actual historical contexts.

Multiple Texts or Editions of the Same Writing

A sixth consideration that affects exegesis is the existence of multiple texts of the same document. Frequently two or more copies of a given document exist, but they exhibit considerable differences. At this point, the interpreter is confronted with the problem of determining the actual wording of the text to be interpreted. Differences between copies of the same work are more common for ancient than for modern works.

The existence of divergent texts of the same work posed problems for interpreters even after the use of the printing press became widespread in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Many of Shakespeare's (1564–1616) plays exist in such different forms that the study of these texts and their textual history has become a popular, highly controversial field.

Before the use of the printing press, copies of texts were always made by hand. Even copies of short texts generally contained numerous differences from the original, including misspellings, omitted words or units, and repeated words or units. We possess few texts from antiquity in their original form. Such texts are usually called autographs. Most often we possess copies of copies of the original. Since no one copy of any text of major size agrees exactly with another copy of the same text, this requires the exegete to inquire about the text in its original or authorial form.

The problem of multiple texts of the same work becomes more complicated when those texts have been preserved in several languages. If differences between copies exist but all the copies are in the same language, this presents the problem at one level. If there are diverging copies of the same work in several languages, this adds another level of complexity.

Copies of manuscripts of Aristotle's works, for example, exist in Greek, Latin, and Arabic. Where there are significant differences between these, the exegete must work across language boundaries to discover what appears to be the most likely reading.

Sacred Texts

Exegetical practice is further complicated when the text being studied is considered sacred. This special quality is implied by the frequently used title "Holy Bible," which signifies that it belongs to a special category. "Word of God" has similar significance—the text as a whole is not only about God but is also thought to be *from* God. Many readers treat such texts differently from other texts, even those from the same historical period. Regarding a text as sacred usually involves more than treating it as good literature or as a classical work.

We are all familiar with the concept of Western literature's classical works as reflected in introductory English literature anthologies. There are certain well-accepted criteria by which literary works are recognized as classics. For a work to be considered a classic, it must be well written and considered to be a good example of its genre. It must also engage issues and concerns that characterize recurrent human conditions: it transcends the time and place of its original composition. Readers from diverse backgrounds agree that its message is universal. A classic typically possesses a distinctive literary quality and exhibits a level of reflective thought that invites multiple if not infinite interpretations.

A sacred text may possess some or all the characteristics of a classic, but it may not be considered great literature by certain literary standards. Even so, its authority does not derive from its literary quality, or even its status as a classic, but rather from the normative status acknowledged by a community of readers who regard it as the Word of God. We may have strong opinions about classical works, even embracing their views of the world and the human condition, but classical "sacred" texts typically possess a distinctive aura of authority that directly informs and shapes the behavior of individuals and communities of believers. They are consequential texts because readers seek not only information from them, but also advice and guidance that relate to their ultimate destiny.

Sacred texts belong to the category of Scripture, which has several distinguishing characteristics.

First, Scripture possesses an authority for individuals or groups that exceeds normal conditions. In popular parlance, we sometimes speak of a sportsman's "bible" or some other authoritative text, such as *The Guinness Book of World Records*, to which final appeal is made when some point is being argued or contested. By this we mean that its authority exceeds that of other books. It can be used to resolve disputes or controversies. By analogy, religious groups usually possess their own distinctive set of Scriptures, whether it is the Muslim Qur'an or the Jewish and Christian Bibles.

Second, Scriptures occupy an official position in the life of the groups that regard them as authoritative. They are sources to which appeal is made and whose contents in a special way inform the lives and thoughts of communities and their members.

Third, Scriptures are understood to embody a truer reflection of reality than other writings. This higher reality is thought to have been expressed through the voice, thought, or word of God in a way that is not true of other writings.

By their very nature, Scriptures bear special relationships to the communities that consider them sacred. These communities have frequently participated in the production and formation of their Scriptures. The sacredness of Scriptures is based on community decisions that assigned them a special role in their lives. In addition, the manner in which the communities have understood and interpreted their Scriptures becomes a decisive influence in how they are assessed. Communities of faith often bring assumptions to their Scriptures and thereby develop systems of thought and religious practices. Interpreting the Scriptures becomes a central feature of their life together. Traditions of interpretation develop around the Scriptures and sometimes become as important as the Scriptures themselves. Exegetes of a sacred text must take into account the mutual influence between Scripture and tradition. They must recognize that the Scriptures have informed traditions of interpretation and practice and that those very traditions shape how the Scriptures are read and interpreted.

Summary

So far, we have noted that exegesis can embrace both general explanation of a text and specialized, critical interpretation. But in spite of this technical focus, exegesis is part of a more comprehensive process of oral and written communication. Although exegesis has a specialist dimension, it involves ordinary, commonsense interpretive skills that we all use every day. Even so, some texts require that interpreters possess specialized knowledge in order to understand them. We have also discussed several considerations that complicate the exegetical process and that require exegetes to operate with a multifaceted understanding of texts—their nature and production, along with their preservation and transmission.

The Bible and Exegesis

Biblical exegesis belongs to the category of specialized exegesis. Interpreting the Bible differs from reading a letter from a friend, an article in a contemporary magazine, a newspaper account of some event, or a modern novel or short story. The seven considerations that can influence the exegetical process noted in the previous section are all related in one way or another to biblical exegesis.

1. The Bible was originally addressed to ancient readers. None of us was involved in the original communication events as either senders or receivers. Paul's letters were written to the Romans, the Galatians, the Corinthians, and other early Christian communities and individuals. When we read Paul's letters, we are reading somebody else's mail. The books of Luke and Acts were accounts written for someone named Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1).

Many other examples could be adduced, but these illustrations remind us that when we interpret ancient biblical writings, we are doing so from the perspective of a third party—someone who is overhearing and trying to understand an earlier conversation.

2. The Bible was composed in ancient languages. The OT was written in Hebrew and Aramaic, the NT in Greek. Even the modern Israeli who speaks Hebrew or someone whose native language is modern Greek recognizes that the languages of the Bible are not exactly the same as modern Hebrew and Greek. Although the Bible was not originally written in Latin, it was translated into Latin early in the Christian era. For many centuries and well into the modern period, the Latin Bible known as the Vulgate was widely used by Christian readers. As modern exegetes of the Bible, we must take into consideration the language barrier that separates us from the original biblical writings and their early translation into other languages.

3. As modern readers of the Bible, we are separated from the original authors and readers of the texts by an enormous cultural gap. The culture presupposed by the Bible is that of the ancient Mediterranean world in general and especially Palestine. Remembering a few general characteristics of biblical culture enables us to appreciate its difference from much modern culture.

The social structures presupposed by the writers of biblical materials were patriarchal and authoritarian. The dominant economic system was based on agricultural production, which was closely related to village life. Diets were seasonal. Medical arts were primitive. Machines were relatively simple. Slavery was widespread. Mortality rates were high, especially for infants. Travel was slow and difficult. Life was characterized by stability and similarity rather than change. Human life was oriented to the cycles of nature and climate. Entertainment was limited. Good artificial lighting did not exist. Animals were slaughtered, dressed, and burned on altars as an integral part of worship. Divine beings, both good and bad, were assumed to be participants in the ongoing course of life and history. Time was also understood and measured differently. While the modern cycle of weekdays and weekends is firmly fixed in most countries, the ancient Mediterranean world has been described as "a world without weekends." Feast days and other celebrations were regularly observed, but otherwise every day was a workday.

4. Modern readers of the Bible also experience a historical or chronological gap that ranges from almost two millennia to over three millennia. The biblical writings were composed over a period of twelve centuries. Since these biblical writings originated over such a long period of time, informed interpreters must understand the different historical contexts within which the books and traditions of the Bible came into being.

In addition to the length of time over which the Bible was written, there are two other historical considerations. First, much of the Bible takes the form of historical narrative. To call the Bible a history book is a misleading simplification, but much of it is concerned with historical matters. Interpreters cannot ignore this pervasive historical dimension of the biblical writings. Second, biblical writers often express their thoughts and develop their theology while using the categories of past, present, and future. Not only do they take seriously the course of historical events; they also operate with categories that are dependent upon historical perspectives.

5. Collective authorship and the gradual growth of biblical traditions are clearly evident in the Bible, especially the OT. Since we do not know for certain who wrote any of the OT books, it is impossible to speak of individual authors of these writings. Instead, most of the OT writings appear to have been composed and developed over time, with many persons contributing to their formation.

For centuries, Moses was assumed to have been the sole author of the Pentateuch, except for the account of his death and burial in

Deuteronomy 34. In the twelfth century, the Jewish exegete Ibn Ezra (ca. 1092–1167) hinted, in a cryptic fashion, that some of the Pentateuch might be post-Mosaic. Gradually the idea of multiple sources and authors behind this material was explored. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, scholars developed the theory that four major sources, none written by Moses, had been combined to produce the Pentateuch. These sources were (1) the J source, so-called because of its use of the name Yahweh for God (spelled Jahwe in German) and its assumed connection with Judah; (2) the E source, because of its use of Elohim to refer to God and its possible connection with the northern tribe of Ephraim; (3) the D source, found primarily in Deuteronomy; and (4) the P, or Priestly, source, found primarily in the second half of Exodus and the books of Leviticus and Numbers. These J, E, D, and P sources were assumed to have been combined in the exilic or postexilic period to produce the Pentateuch.

If we take Amos as a typical example of a prophetic book, the diversity of material in the book makes it impossible to speak of Amos as the author. In the book, we find four types of material: (a) a superscription provides some historical data about the prophet (1:1); (b) much of the book consists of oracles or speeches attributed to the prophet (1:2–6:14; 8:4–14; 9:5–15); (c) some material is biographical, like the superscription, and speaks of the prophet in the third person (7:10–17); (d) other material reports visions by the prophet and appears to be autobiographical, with the prophet referring to himself in the first person (7:1–9; 8:1–3; 9:1–4). These diverse elements in Amos suggest that it was an edited work produced by someone other than the prophet himself. Practically all the prophetic books reflect these same features.

Evidence of collective authorship and historical growth is also reflected in thematic changes and the different political situations presupposed in a given OT writing. Since the Middle Ages, scholars have noted that the historical conditions, the style of the speeches, and the content of the first part of Isaiah differ from those in the second part. Isaiah 1–39 presupposes a struggling state of Judah, defending itself against the aggressive and powerful Assyrian Empire. Isaiah 40–66 assumes that the Judeans are in exile and that a faltering Babylonian Empire is the major political power; Isaiah 44–45 envisions a rising Persian Empire. Chapters 1–39 presuppose the historical conditions of the eighth century BCE; chapters 40–66 reflect conditions of the sixth century BCE. To interpret the latter half of Isaiah as though it came from the eighth century BCE would be like interpreting a twenty-first-century writing as though it came from the nineteenth century. Like many portions of the OT, the book of Isaiah must be viewed as an anthology of materials coming from different periods.

6. As with most writings from antiquity, the oldest manuscripts of the OT and NT we possess are approximate copies made long after the original documents were written. The oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible—the Leningrad Codex—dates from the Middle Ages (the copy was made in 1008 CE). The oldest complete manuscript of the NT—Codex Sinaiticus—dates from the fourth century CE. About 5,000 different Greek manuscripts or fragments of the NT are known. Of these, no two are identical. The manuscript copies of the Hebrew Bible or parts thereof are less numerous. In recent years, however, older fragments and almost complete manuscripts of some books of the OT have been discovered in caves in the Dead Sea region of Palestine. Some of these show considerable differences from the standard Hebrew texts.

Since the Bible was translated into other languages, such as Syriac, Latin, and Coptic, these early versions must also be taken into account in our interpretations. This is especially the case with the OT, which was translated into Greek and Aramaic during the last centuries BCE and the early centuries CE. In addition, the first five books of the OT also exist in an early Hebrew form known as the Samaritan Pentateuch, which differs in many ways from the standard Hebrew text. This means that ancient translations of the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek writings into other languages can provide valuable information for biblical exegetes.

7. That the Bible falls into the category of sacred Scripture needs little elaboration. Two matters should be noted, one positive and one negative. Today's biblical exegete has been preceded by centuries of biblical study and interpretation that can be drawn upon for perspectives and insights. But this long history of interpretation also means that the Bible as sacred Scripture is now surrounded by various traditions and traditional interpretations. The exegete is frequently tempted to read the text in light of these traditions—what we were taught it meant—without exercising any critical judgment or allowing the text to speak on its own terms. To do this is to engage in what is called "*eis*egesis," an interpretive practice in which we read our own traditions and opinions *into* the text rather than listening to what the text itself actually says.

The above considerations might suggest that exegesis of the Bible is a formidable if not impossible task. In one sense it is; but in another sense, it is not. If the Bible in its manuscript and translated forms were newly discovered and we had to approach its interpretation as a completely new endeavor, we would face a truly overwhelming challenge. Interpretive tools and resources would need to be developed, along with methods of approaching these new materials.

Fortunately, modern exegetes are in a different position. No other book has been studied as extensively as the Bible. Throughout the centuries, thousands of people have interpreted the Bible, developed special methods of interpretation, and prepared study resources that are now available to us. Tools for biblical study have also been prepared by scholars who have spent their lives engaged in biblical exegesis and interpretation. These scholarly materials have always been available in libraries; modern technology makes them even more accessible now. Having these rich resources at our disposal gives us an enormous advantage in our exegetical work.

Biblical Exegesis through the Centuries

From their earliest days, Jews and Christians have sought to understand their Scriptures, to explain their contents, to appropriate their meaning, and to apply their teachings to daily life. How this has been done has varied throughout history. Some have suggested that the history of Judaism and Christianity cannot be understood apart from the ways in which their respective Scriptures have been interpreted. How these two closely related religious communities have understood the task of interpretation says a lot about their religious self-consciousness and their relationship to the culture within which they existed.

Broadly speaking, the history of biblical exegesis may be divided into three major periods, each of which reflects particular interests and characteristics. These are (1) the early and medieval period; (2) the period of the Reformation, with its roots in late medieval Jewish scholarship and the Renaissance; and (3) the modern period, in which earlier methods of interpretation were refined and new ones were developed. Although this threefold classification oversimplifies many historical complexities, it provides a useful framework for understanding how biblical exegesis has developed over the centuries.

The Early and Medieval Period

In the early phase of biblical interpretation, readers tended to assume that the faith and practices of their communities were identical with, and directly authorized by, the teachings of the Bible. Since they believed that the Bible was divinely given, they assumed that their appropriation of its teachings was divinely ordained. Interpreters of the Bible believed that they were discerning the will of God as it had been given to the biblical writers and embodied in the texts. They thought that everything in the Bible, even its difficulties and problematic texts, was divine revelation. One rabbi advised: "Search it and search it, for everything is in it."

Recognizing biblical exegesis as a specialized discipline, ancient interpreters developed special rules for its interpretation. Rabbi Hillel (d. beginning of the first century CE) formulated seven rules for interpreting Scripture in order to determine normative practices. These were expanded to thirteen by Rabbi Ishmael in the second century and later were modified and enlarged. The Christian scholar Tyconius (d. about 400) also formulated seven rules to be used in understanding biblical texts.

Generally, the theology of the interpreters and their respective communities influenced the results of their exegesis in this early period. This was especially the case with the Christian use of the OT. In describing how the Bible should be interpreted, Augustine (354–430) wrote:

> Every student of the Divine Scriptures must exercise himself, having found nothing else in them except, first, that God is to be loved for Himself, and his neighbor for the sake of God; second, that he is to love God with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his mind; and third, that he should love his neighbor as himself, that is, so that all love for our neighbor should, like all love for ourselves, be referred to God. (*On Christian Doctrine* 2.7.10)

If a text did not teach love, Augustine insisted, it should not be interpreted at face value: "Whatever appears in the divine Word that does not literally pertain to virtuous behavior or to the truth of faith, you must take to be figurative" (3.10.14). This often meant ignoring the "precise meaning which the author . . . intends to express" (1.36.40). Augustine further advised his readers that "when investigation reveals an uncertainty, . . . the rule of faith [the content of Christian faith] should be consulted as it is found in the more open places of Scripture and in the authority of the Church" (3.2.2).

When Augustine talked about the figurative meaning of texts, he meant finding a hidden or secondary meaning behind statements in Scripture. The practice of finding several levels of meaning within texts was widespread in the ancient world. The Greek Stoic philosophers employed allegorical interpretation to explain problematic features of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. This enabled them to account for, or explain away, offensive behaviors attributed to the Olympic deities. Using allegorical interpretation, readers found philosophical and ethical teachings in the text that were not otherwise obvious in a literal reading.

This allegorical approach was greatly developed in the Egyptian city of Alexandria and was applied to the OT by the Jewish exegete Philo (ca. 20 BCE–50 CE). The Christian scholar Origen (ca. 185–254 CE) argued that all biblical texts could have more than one meaning. “Just as [a human] consists of body, soul, and spirit,” Origen wrote, “in the same way so does the Scripture” (*On First Principles* 4.2.4). Because the literal meaning of some texts did not agree with accepted theology or ethics, Origen said that such texts “have no bodily sense at all, [and] there are occasions when we must seek only for the soul and the spirit, as it were, of the passage” (4.2.5). All texts could thus be taken as having a special, secondary spiritual (symbolic, typological, or allegorical) meaning, and at times the straightforward meaning could be totally ignored.

Allegorical interpretation could be applied not only to difficult, problematic texts but also to other texts in order to edify believers. The classic example of this is Augustine’s analysis of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). Augustine said the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho refers to Adam. Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell. Jericho means the moon and stands for human mortality, for the moon is born, waxes, wanes, and dies. The thieves who attacked Adam are the devil and his angels. They stripped him of his immortality and beat him by persuading him to sin. They left him half dead. The priest and the Levite who passed the man by without helping him are the priesthood and ministry of the OT, which cannot bring salvation. The term “Samaritan” is taken to mean Guardian, thus referring to Jesus himself. The binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin. Oil is the comfort of good hope, and wine is the exhortation to work with fervent spirit. The beast on which the man was placed signifies the flesh in which Christ appeared among men. Being set on the beast means belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn to which the man was taken is the church, where persons are refreshed on their pilgrimage of return to the heavenly city. The two pieces of money that the Samaritan gave to the innkeeper are the promise of this life and of life to come, or else the two main sacraments. The innkeeper is the apostle Paul (*Questions on the Gospels* 2.19).

Not everyone in the early church favored this type of fanciful, allegorical interpretation that enabled readers to find multiple levels of meaning in the biblical text. A group of interpreters associated with Antioch of

Syria, such as John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–428), emphasized the literal, or "plain," meaning of Scripture. Rather than looking for the hidden (allegorical) meaning behind a biblical statement, they sought to understand the inspired writer's intended meaning. For the Antiochian school of interpretation, a typological or nonliteral reading of a biblical text was permissible only when it did no violence to the straightforward or literal meaning. Especially important to Antiochian interpreters was honoring and retaining the organic unity of the entire Bible, which they thought was threatened by those who resorted to frequent, ad hoc allegorical interpretation.

Eventually the interpretive approach of finding multiple meanings in texts dominated. The standard practice through most of the Middle Ages was to look for four meanings in a text: (a) the literal (straightforward or historical) meaning, (b) the allegorical (spiritualized or symbolic) meaning, (c) the tropological (moral or ethical) meaning, and (d) the anagogical (eschatological or heavenly) meaning. A short medieval Latin poem gave expression to this approach:

> The letter shows us what God and our fathers did;
> The allegory shows us where our faith is hid;
> The moral meaning gives us rules of daily life;
> The anagogy shows us where we end our strife.

While Jewish exegesis developed in many directions, it tended to adhere more closely to the literal meaning. Perhaps this resulted from Jewish resistance to interpretive approaches influenced by Greek philosophy, or from a greater desire to follow the explicit edicts and teachings of the biblical texts. Nonetheless, even Jewish exegesis eventually devised a fourfold interpretation of texts: (a) *peshat* (the plain meaning), (b) *remez* (allusion or allegory), (c) *derash* (the homiletical appropriation), and (d) *sod* (the mystical or secret). This fourfold interpretation of a text came to be referred to by the acronym PaRDeS, which means "Paradise."

Late Renaissance and Reformation

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, important shifts of perspective occurred in biblical interpretation and exegesis. The impetus for some of these shifts came from Jewish scholarship of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Scholars like Ibn Ezra (d. 1167) and Rashi (d. 1105) emphasized the grammatical analysis of texts, which had as its goal the elucidation of the plain meaning (*peshat*) of texts. Renaissance scholars of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries rediscovered early classical texts; they formulated new approaches that took these new discoveries into account.

Some interpreters resisted the urge to find multiple meanings in biblical texts while still holding to the inspiration of the Scriptures. Martin Luther (1483–1546) declared: "The Holy Spirit is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and earth, and therefore His words cannot have more than one, and that the very simplest, sense, which we call the literal, ordinary, natural, sense."

There was a break with traditional methods of interpretation as the best means of understanding texts. Throughout the Middle Ages, interpretation often meant nothing more than noting what the church fathers and earlier authorities had said about a text. The new impetus tended to bypass church tradition in order to let the original texts speak for themselves. The slogan for this new emphasis was *ad fontes* (to the sources).

Translations into the common languages meant a break with the Christian custom of using the Bible only in Latin. This development raised the problem of which text was to be used in making translations. It also stimulated the study of Hebrew and Greek as well as the printing of texts in the original biblical languages.

The freedom granted interpreters in Protestantism, rather than producing the unanimity of opinion that the Reformers had rather naively assumed would result, led instead to a multitude of opinions, each of which some people believed to be based on sound exegesis and interpretation. It soon became obvious that the theological stance and historical situation of the interpreters played an important role in exegesis.

The development of secular learning—philosophy, science, and general humanistic thought—meant that the Bible was no longer taken as the final, exclusive authority on many matters. Reason came to occupy an important role in the wider culture. New rationalistic explanations of history and human behavior came into conflict with systems of thought based on the Bible, revelation, and ecclesiastical tradition.

A new understanding of history, especially as it related to the Bible, affected interpretation. In the medieval world, the past and present tended to blend into a unified whole. Rather than viewing the past as a previous, distinct period, medieval thinkers often saw the past as an earlier expression of the present. With the development of history as an academic discipline, scholars drew attention to the chronological and cultural gaps between the present and the past. Firmly anchored in the past, the Bible was increasingly seen as a book that originated in the distant past and reflected an archaic outlook.

The Modern Period: Post-Enlightenment to the Present

The modern period of biblical interpretation, extending from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment to the present, was characterized by one general aim: to study and understand the biblical documents as one would any other set of documents from antiquity. The classic statement of this principle was formulated by the British classical scholar Benjamin Jowett (1817–93), who insisted that the Bible should be understood within its original historical setting and read like any other ancient writing. Interpreters increasingly emphasized the relationship between the content of biblical writings and the contexts in which they were composed.

Because of this new emphasis, the Bible was studied from many new perspectives. It was also subjected to a variety of methodological approaches. The Bible was used to reconstruct the history and religion of Israel and the early church. It was also compared with the literature of other early cultures. Many interpreters were also attracted to the Bible because of its aesthetic and artistic values. These new approaches took their place alongside study of the Bible for its religious values and theological insights. Throughout this period, the Bible continued to serve as a foundation document for both Judaism and Christianity. Today the Bible is often studied and taught in contexts that are strictly academic, with no explicit connection to a community of faith. In subsequent chapters of this handbook, we will examine some of the approaches that developed out of this period.

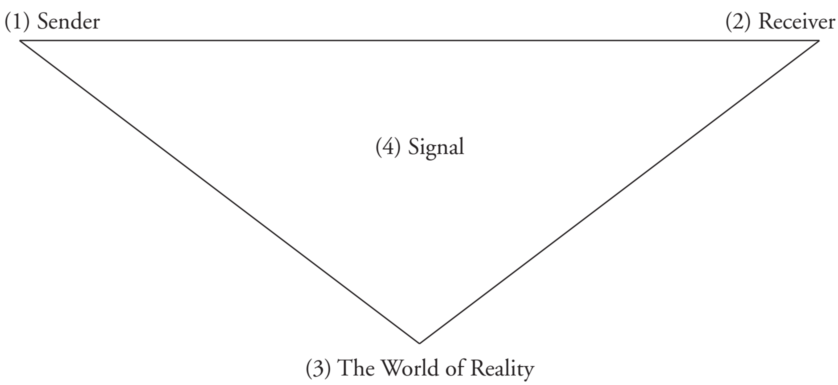
The Task of Biblical Exegesis

Exegesis should be seen as a systematic way of interpreting a text. As noted earlier, exegesis is employed in many aspects of life, but biblical exegesis has its own specialized needs and disciplines. Its goal is quite simple: to reach an informed understanding of the text. This is different from saying that the exegete seeks to determine *the* meaning of the text. A biblical text can be meaningful in different ways and at different levels, depending on the interpreter's perspective and goals. Different types of exegesis have been developed to address these multiple dimensions of meaning.

Because texts yield meaning in different ways, we can never produce an exegesis of a text as though it were the final word. Each time we return to a classic text such as the Bible, we can expect to find fresh meaning. With each new encounter, our goal is the same: to develop a coherent, informed interpretation that is based on the best knowledge available to us. Even if we have read a biblical text many times, with each new reading we may see it from a different perspective and experience new insights. Thus exegesis does not allow us to master the text so much as it enables us to enter it.

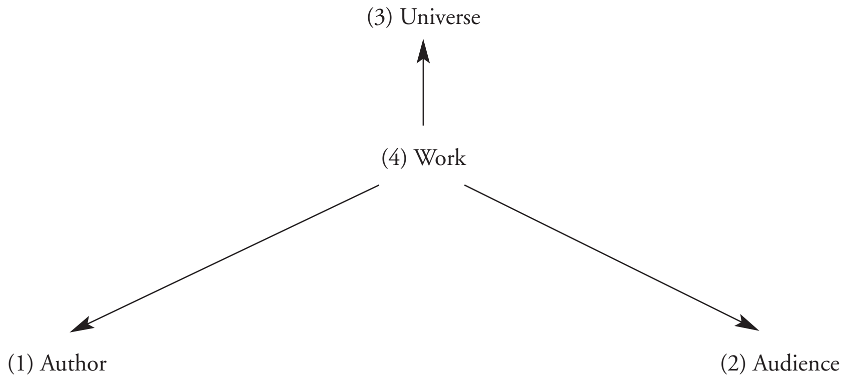
Exegesis may be thought of as learning how to ask questions of the text. Our questions arise in different ways. We may bring certain questions to a text before we read it, but the simple act of reading the text may prompt new questions. We can put many questions to a text, but doing exegesis is often a matter of knowing which questions to ask. As we gain experience in interpreting texts, we realize that some questions are worth pursuing, while others are not; or that some questions are answerable in ways that others are not. As a rule, certain types of interpretation have arisen in order to address a specific set of questions. The questions we ask of a text determine what methods we employ to interpret it.

We can appreciate the multiple aspects of exegesis by drawing on the study of linguistics. One way of understanding the process of communication is through the "communication triangle." In highly simplified form, it can be depicted as follows:

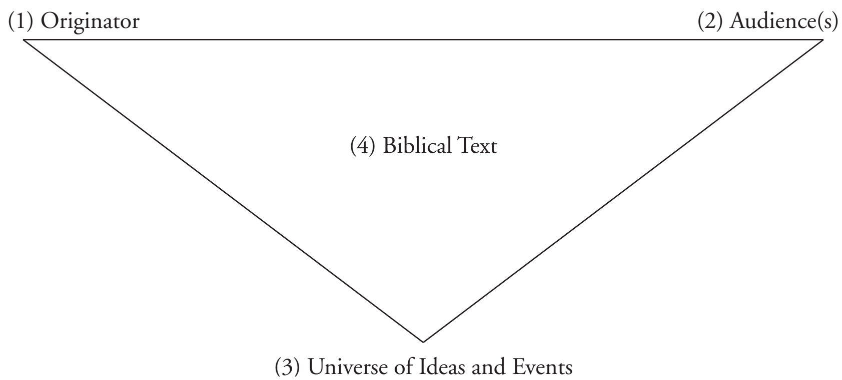


In this diagram, the sender represents the speaker, writer, or artist with whom the communication originates. The receiver is the audience, listener, hearer, or reader to whom the communication is addressed or is of interest. The world of reality denotes the universe of objects, ideas, and meanings that are shared by the sender and receiver and make communication possible. The signal is the means of communication. For the artist, the signal is the work of art; for a writer, it is the text.

A similar schematic diagram, originally introduced by Meyer H. Abrams and widely used to illustrate various literary-critical theories, offers some close parallels to the communication triangle. This second diagram is as follows:

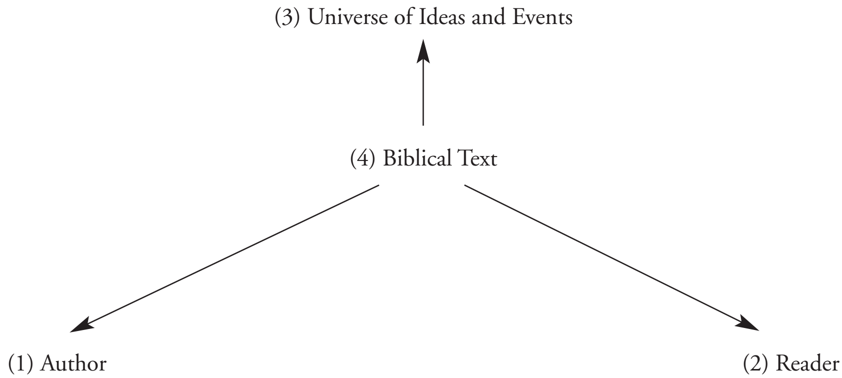


If we apply the first model to biblical interpretation, the following triangle would result:



The originator of the biblical text may be an author, editor, or redactor. A specific text may have had numerous authors, editors, or redactors. In some cases, the originator is best understood as a community, such as a group within Israel responsible for producing certain psalms. The audience may be the original hearer or reader, but it can also include subsequent hearers or readers. The universe of ideas is the thought world, perspectives, and understandings that are shared by the originator(s) and audience(s). This shared universe of ideas, which is mirrored within the biblical text, enables communication to occur. The signal is the medium of communication, which may have originally been oral or written, but now exists in written form.

If we apply the second diagram to the process of biblical interpretation, it looks as follows:



Problems that confront us as modern exegetes may be classified according to which part of the model our questions address. We can also use the model to illustrate the ancient or modern communication process. We can interrogate the text in terms of the author's initial communication, the (hypothetical) original shape of the text, the world of ideas shared by the original parties to the communication, and the original audience's hearing, understanding, and reception of the communication. Or we can ask about later forms of the text, later audiences, and later understandings of reality. As modern readers, we can see ourselves as an audience, reading the text in an even later form (generally in translation) and in the context of a universe of ideas that differs significantly from that of the original participants.

Specific types of biblical criticism have been developed to answer certain questions or solve certain problems in the task of biblical exegesis. In the remainder of this book, we will be discussing some of these methods, what questions they intended to address, and how they developed. Our choice of topics is not arbitrary. Over the centuries, a broad consensus has developed among biblical interpreters about the kinds of questions to ask, the problems to be encountered, and the methods to be employed.

Debates still continue about the value of asking certain questions and the usefulness of various types of biblical criticism. But we cannot pretend that these questions have never been asked before or that our predecessors have not worked hard to formulate meaningful ways of responding to these questions.

Like all historical processes, this centuries-long discussion has registered gains and losses. Some methods of interpretation are no longer in vogue, while others have endured over time. The variety of methods to be discussed attests to the richness and diversity of the biblical documents. Often these methods of interpretation complement each other. This reminds us that there is not just one approach to a biblical text: there are many. Even when we employ several methods, we still cannot establish a single meaning for a biblical passage.

We treat these different approaches as types of criticism, which is a technical expression used by scholars to denote a field of study in which some clearly defined principles and techniques have been developed. The word "criticism" derives from the Greek word *krinein*, meaning "to judge" or "to discern." It refers to evaluative interpretation in which discerning judgments are made. A literary critic is someone who studies literary writings, attempting to make intelligent and informed judgments about them as literature. A film critic does the same for movies, an art critic for art, a food critic for cooking. In the end, such judgments may be negative or positive, complimentary or uncomplimentary, but "criticism" need not be a pejorative term. Biblical criticism, as a broad category, encompasses many subdisciplines and a wide variety of interpretive activities that seek to make discerning judgments about the Bible. As such, "being critical" is not equivalent to "being destructive." It rather signifies an attempt to reach an informed judgment about a creative work or writing.

Most of the questions that arise when modern readers engage in exegesis can be classified under one or more of the types of criticism. When we discover a variant reading within a text and wonder what the original wording might have been, we are addressing problems that are dealt with in *textual criticism*. Before interpreting any biblical text, we must decide at the outset the wording of the text to be considered.

Another set of questions pertains to the historical, geographical, and cultural setting of the text: the context of the original author(s) and audience(s). If certain customs, events, places, and names mentioned in the text are unfamiliar to us, we must gather information about them in order to develop an informed understanding of the text. This applies not only to matters referred to in the text itself but also to the setting in which the text originated and its history of transmission. Determining the chronological period, geographical locale, and authorship of the document can be equally important. Such questions fall under the rubric of *historical criticism*.

Grammatical criticism deals with questions relating to the language of the text. This includes the words themselves, either singly or in phrases, as well as syntax—the way in which the words are put together in sentences or paragraphs. Understanding the grammar of a passage may require us to become familiar with the rules of grammar in effect at the time the passage was written. Often interpretive questions can be resolved only through grammatical analysis.

Concern with the style, character, compositional techniques, and rhetorical patterns constitutes the field of *literary criticism*. At an early stage of biblical studies, literary criticism was understood narrowly and identified with source analysis, which seeks to identify the literary (and oral) sources that were used by writers in composing a text. But this constitutes only one aspect of literary criticism. Where the passage is located and how it functions within the larger literary document are often crucial for understanding a text. This is especially the case in narrative texts in which events are arranged in chronological sequence or in some other organizational pattern. Since most of the biblical documents originally existed in oral form or were written to be read aloud, ancient authors usually gave close attention to how the material should be arranged for maximum effect upon listeners. For this reason, we must also attend to rhetorical features of a text.

While literary criticism deals with how the passage is structured and how it relates to its larger literary unit, *form criticism* focuses more narrowly on a single passage or on subunits in a passage. Special attention is given to the literary form, or genre, of the passage. Here we ask whether a passage is a narrative, a story, a parable, a prophetic speech, or a hymn. These questions have become important to biblical interpreters because of the close relationship between form and meaning. We read a poem one way, prose another way. The literary form of a passage creates certain expectations for the interpreter. Form criticism also deals with the social context in which texts originated. These "life settings" include such varied activities as worship, teaching, preaching, and debate.

It is now widely recognized that the Bible, in many of its parts, resembles an anthology of sacred writings in which revered stories, traditions, and sayings uttered by individuals and preserved by various communities have been collected, edited, and formed into a single text. Many of these texts have a "prehistory," which means that they were spoken or written much earlier than the time they were incorporated into the biblical text itself. Efforts to uncover the earlier stages of development through which a text has passed are dealt with under *tradition criticism*.

Even though a text might have a prehistory, we find it located within a specific biblical writing. For this reason, we also ask how the author(s) or editor(s) intended a passage to be understood in its final literary form. *Redaction criticism* focuses on the changes or redactions a text underwent in reaching its final form. It assesses the significance of such changes and how these reveal the theological outlook of the author or editor.

Some interpreters read the biblical text without regard to such historically oriented matters as the origin of the text, the intention of the author, and the original audience. Such approaches focus on the structure of the text and how universal beliefs are embodied within it. *Structural criticism*, an approach that draws heavily on literary and philosophical theory in nonbiblical disciplines, addresses these dimensions of the text. This form of biblical criticism uses the structure of a text as a clue for deriving its meaning.

While structuralism focuses on coherent patterns of meaning that are seen as reflecting "deep structures" of thought or universal principles shared by everyone, a competing approach—poststructuralism—concentrates instead on fissures within the text. By this is meant tensions, contradictions, or aspects of the text that reflect differences rather than similarities. In order to analyze a text, poststructuralists "deconstruct" the text by identifying and assessing these differences. Poststructuralism should not be seen as an interpretive movement that follows structuralism as a clearly defined "second stage," but rather as an alternative set of conversations that have occurred concurrently with structuralist criticism. Poststructuralism can be thought of as an umbrella term that encompasses several different critical theories of interpretation.

Over the centuries, biblical writings have been compiled into defined collections from which certain writings have been excluded. These prescribed lists of writings constitute the Jewish and Christian canons. When several sacred writings are collected into a single book—the Bible—the whole becomes more than the sum of the parts. Individual writings are read not only in their own right but in light of each other and in light of the whole. *Canonical criticism* explores how the Scriptures were transmitted and shaped by believing communities to produce a canon and how these texts are to be read and understood as parts of a collection of sacred writings.

By distinguishing these different types of biblical criticism, we do not imply that exegesis is a mechanical undertaking that occurs in a stair-step fashion, as if one method or stage of exegesis always leads to the next. Depending on the nature of a specific text, questions may arise in different ways. Initially we may be puzzled by literary or historical features of a text and only later discover that an important textual variant within the passage needs to be clarified. Even though questions may arise from the text in a somewhat random fashion, they need not be pursued randomly. Even the novice interpreter soon discovers systematic ways of tackling various exegetical questions.

Exegesis generally occurs in two stages: analysis and synthesis. At the outset, we examine different aspects of the passage, including historical, grammatical, and literary questions related to the text. This helps us "break down" the passage into its component parts. We address individual problems and investigate discrete units of material. Even though we may pursue these questions separately, they often relate to each other, even inform each other. As we analyze a text, our understanding of the passage gradually increases. Here we are laying the groundwork for synthesis.

By synthesis, we mean the process by which we pull together the results of our investigation. In analysis, we deconstruct the text; in synthesis, we reconstruct it. In the latter, our goal is to relate our analytical investigations to each other, weigh the significance of individual findings in light of the others, and decide how all of these contribute to our overall understanding of the passage.

As we engage in exegesis, we discover that it can have both a positive and a negative function. Positively, we are able to make claims about the text that were previously unknown to us or about which we were uncertain. In this way, exegesis produces new knowledge, at least for us as interpreters. Negatively, we may succeed only in determining what the text *cannot* mean. Sometimes the most productive part of exegesis is exposing ways of reading or understanding a text that are no longer defensible or viable. We may discover that what we thought a text meant is not supported by the evidence we have uncovered. But even negative knowledge can have positive benefit.

We may employ the tools, methods, and approaches of different forms of biblical criticism, such as lexicography, textual criticism, and historical analysis, all of which can be highly technical, even scientific, in nature. But exegesis is as much art as it is science. It requires both imagination and creativity, not only in learning how to put questions to a text, but also in learning how to answer these questions. Above all, exegesis requires that we synthesize our answers into a coherent, meaningful interpretation of the passage. Exegesis may draw on several theological specialties, many of them highly technical, but it also challenges us to draw on our creative capacities in order to develop interpretations that are informed, imaginative, interesting, and compelling.

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