

Guide for Writing an Exegesis On a Biblical Passage

A. Initial Approach

1. *Context.*

Locate your pericope both within the immediate context of the basic division of the book and the overall structural units of the book. You may have to read a couple of chapters to get the sense of the functions of the pericope in the wider unit. Look for key words and transitions in making your determination of the parameters of the pericope. This assumes you are familiar with the general features of the document in which your passage occurs, including historical issues [authorship, audience, date, and occasion of composition, historical setting, etc.]. Also it presumes some acquaintance with the literary characteristics of the book or letter [genre, compositional structure, stylistic features, etc.] and theological concerns [distinct themes such as faith, sin, covenant etc., perspectives, and emphases]. Consult good introductions, commentaries, and Bible dictionaries if you have a need to supplement your basic knowledge in this area.

2. *Paraphrase.*

Write out a preliminary paraphrase of your pericope. If you have knowledge of Greek and Hebrew this will involve translating the passage. If your facility in the original language(s) of the text is limited, get the most literal translation (NASV) and then check it with a number of other translations. Do not merely copy the standard translation. Expand and fill it out. [Look for the basic idea of the text. What is the author really trying to say?]

3. *Textual Variants.*

Check for any substantial textual variants. End up with your final text. This may bring the first of several modifications of your paraphrase. Every step in the process could mean a modification of your paraphrase. Record points that deepen, modify or give additional insight to your paraphrase.

4. *Fundamental Issue.*

Now, please ask yourself why you wish to understand the passage more fully and what information you are looking for in the text. Come to the text with a set of questions (historical, literary, above all theological). Distill these down, if possible, to a fundamental question of which the others may be subsets. This is important because it will provide a focus for your exegesis as you move through your passage. Remember that you need to be open to the idea that your exegesis may show that your text does not address your question directly but is primarily concerned about something else. This is good. It shows that you are “listening” to the text and not telling it what you think it should say.

B. Analysis of the Text.

You are now ready to proceed into a full-scale analysis of the passage: the exegesis itself. As noted above, there is no predetermined set of mechanical steps to follow as one might find in a manual on fixing automobiles. Rather, the image of the exegete may be likened to a surgeon carrying out very delicate brain surgery. It is as much an art as it is a procedure. However, certain factors must be taken into consideration. These will be noted below.

1. *Literary Form or Genre.*

It is always helpful to know what particular literary form you are working with. Sometimes this is fairly obvious (Col 1:15-20 is a hymn or Matt 13:1-8 is a parable). Most good commentaries will give you information about these literary forms and where these may be variations from the norm in your particular unit. Sometimes this can be very handy information. Sometimes it is more difficult to determine in what particular form or genre a unit is instantiated. For example, Eph 1:3-14 is usually but not always identified as a Eulogy. You may have to read a commentary to get the necessary information.

2. *Word List.*

Make a list of the theologically significant words and phrases in your unit. Focus especially on those words and phrases that may be pertinent to the specific issue you have under consideration. For examples, you may be working with Rom 3:21-31. Your fundamental issue in examining this text is to ask what it is saying about atonement. You come across the Greek word *Hilasterion* "Expiation." Immediately you would check other translations and the Greek dictionaries (*Lexica*). At this point you will need to put in your notes some suggested changes for your paraphrase. Probably, you want to find out where this word is used elsewhere in the Bible. You will do this by means of concordances. Some of the computerized Bible search material is excellent, especially the Accordance program from Gramcord. Traditional printed concordances are also available. Handy checklists are marginal notes in the Nestle Text (Greek) or notes in a good study Bible. If you are working in a Gospel you may check parallels on the same unit by means of a synopsis/ Finally you may want to look at the uses of this word throughout the ancient world: Theological word books on the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Botterweck/Ringgren, Kittel, Colin Brown, and Spicq) are essential.

3. *Grammar and Syntax.*

After you have looked at the key words it will then be necessary for you to look at the syntax of the passage (i.e. the way the words are put together). Look carefully at such things as the tenses of the verbs, the structures of the sentences, and the connections among phrases and clauses. Be alert to find an unusual construction in the grammar or syntax. *The Idiom Book of NT Greek* by CFD Moule, Zerwick's *Analysis of the Greek NT*, and the *Linguistic Key to the Greek NT* by Reinecker and Rogers are helpful to note on these matters beside the commentaries or exegetical studies. (With respect to the latter

you can find reference to them in O.T. and N.T. abstracts or on Religion indices in the library.)

4. *Use of Critical Methodologies developed for the study of History or Literature.*

Sometimes in a passage there will be a quote or echo from an O.T. passage or, in the case of the gospel parallels, from another gospel account. Information is available that can help you find out where that quote or “tradition” came from, how it was originally used, and what it is doing in your unit. Remember, tradition can come in either oral or written form. Be warned. This is one of the most complex areas of biblical study. Enormous efforts have been expended here. Now that you have moved to the heart of what, in the past two centuries, was called historical criticism. The techniques used by biblical scholars in this area have often been borrowed from historians or literary critics. Considerable caution needs to be exercised by the Christian exegete in using these methods. By and large our focus will be to discover what the author of your text intended to do by the use of this material.

5. *Other Interpretations: Commentaries*

Time spent in this area will probably cause you to add many more notes. Besides the major commentaries, encyclopedia articles and journals continue to proliferate. It is often instructive not only to read interpretations from the most recent commentary but also to take a look at some of the great commentaries from earlier eras in the church.

C. Synthesis of Research

You are now ready to put all of your information together. You may do this in several ways (outlines, summaries, thesis statements, etc.). We suggest the following procedure.

1. Write a paragraph that states in an opening sentence what the point of the passage is, how it interconnects with the context of the wider unit, and what is the overall theological thrust of the unit.
2. Then write a second paragraph showing how your conclusions illuminate both the overall argument of the book and fit into or interrelate with the general pattern of biblical teaching.
3. You may conclude with a third and final paragraph on what (if anything) the passage has to say about your fundamental question or issue that you have now determined it to be all about.
4. Make a final check of your paraphrase to see that it coheres with the results of your research.

D. Application

Now you are ready to write the exegesis or to utilize this text for teaching a class or preaching. Remember we consider that no exegesis is complete without some suggestions for application, even if only for a written report.

E. Writing the Exegesis

1. The goal of your paper should be to describe as clearly and concisely as you can what the passage says and what it must have meant to its original readers.
2. Use the results of your research as a “library” from which to draw information as needed to explain the passage to your reader. You will not necessarily use all of the information you gathered in your research.
3. The organization of the paper will depend somewhat on the nature of the passage being interpreted. The following is suggested as one good approach:
 - a. Provide an introduction stating briefly (a) what you believe to be the central focus of the passage and (b) how you plan to demonstrate this in the course of the paper.
 - b. Support your thesis about the central focus by means of an organized discussion of the passage.
 - (1) Explain the context in which the passage occurs.
 - (2) Identify the form and structure of the passage.
 - (3) Discuss the passage section by section, showing how everything works together to make the central point as you have identified it.
 - (4) Indicate how the point of focus in your passage is related to overall concerns of the document in which it occurs.
 - c. Summarize your findings and comment briefly on the implications of the passage for contemporary theology and preaching or for related areas of research.

F. Common Mistakes to Avoid

1. Avoid simply reporting what others have said about the passage or in some other way showing too heavy dependence on secondary sources. You must wrestle with the issues presented by the passage yourself. Other interpreters should function only as critical discussion partners. (For this reason, it is wise to do your own preliminary work with primary tools before consulting secondary sources.)
2. Avoid the temptation to allow the object of description to become something other than the passage itself (e.g. some related topic or matter of personal interest, the steps of your research, etc.).

3. Avoid the tendency to misconstrue exegesis as a series of disconnected verse-by-verse notations or a series of “word studies.” Words (and verses) have meaning only in relation to other linguistic units in a particular context. Do not discuss the various components of a text in isolation from each other; show how they work together to make a central point.
4. Avoid “majoring on minors.” Let the passage itself determine what is central and what is peripheral. Devote the most attention to the features of the passage that are most central (e.g. do not devote half of your paper to a relatively insignificant variant or side issue).
5. Avoid sermonizing or moralizing. A good sermon *follows* careful exegesis. Do not put the cart before the horse.
6. Avoid errors in grammar and punctuation, spelling and form. Review your paper before you turn it in. (The author, not the typist, bears final responsibility for any errors.)
7. Avoid procrastination. Begin working on the paper long before the deadline so that your comments on the passage will reflect the mature judgment of unhurried reflection.