

How to do an exegetical study¹

By Kevin Gary Smith

Biblical exegesis is a in-depth, inductive examination of a text of scripture in which the exegete systematically applies established hermeneutic tools (exegetical methods) to discover the meaning and implications of a text of a biblical text (or group of texts).

Good biblical exegesis meets all the criteria of research. The object of enquiry is the biblical text. Exegetical methods are research methods. The objective is to resolve an interpretive problem in the text so as to determine its meaning and significance.

Although this chapter offers some guidelines for an exegetical procedure, its goal is to provide a framework for doing exegesis as theological research. For detailed treatment of exegetical procedures, students should consult some of the many excellent exegetical guides (e.g., Stuart 1984; Fee 1993).

Presuppositions of evangelical exegesis

As interpreters, we all approach the biblical text with a set of presuppositions that govern our exegesis. Since these presuppositions influence our exegesis, we should state them openly. My hermeneutic presuppositions influence the method presented in this chapter. If your views differ significantly from mine, you should still find the chapter helpful, but you may need to adapt it. These are my convictions:

1. The scriptures are the inspired Word of God and are inerrant in the autographs.
2. The primary goal of biblical interpretation is to discover the author-intended meaning, that is, the message the Holy Spirit led the human author to convey to the original readers. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to Dr Noel Woodbridge whose research and suggestions provided the foundation for this chapter.

guided the writing process to ensure the intended message is faithfully communicated in writing.²

3. Each text has one primary author-intended meaning; therefore, each passage can have only one correct interpretation. I reject all forms of *sensus plenior* (multiple meanings), especially the idea that the text can mean something to us that it could never have meant to its original readers.
4. The Bible should be interpreted literally, that is, at face value according to the normal rules of communication (i.e., grammatical-historical exegesis).
5. Although a text has only one meaning, it may have many valid applications. The applications derive from the one meaning; they are concrete applications of the same timeless truth.
6. Exegesis must be relevant and valuable to today's believers. To complete his work, an exegete must move from interpretation to application, from the past to the present, from the there-and-then to the here-and-now.

These convictions underlie my approach to exegetical studies. If your presuppositions differ significantly, you may need to adjust the model I am about to present.

Design for an exegetical study

Whether it is a 10-page term paper, a 100-page thesis or a 300-page dissertation, an exegetical study has five main parts: (1) introduction, (2) context, (3) meaning, (4) significance and (5) conclusion. In a term paper, these would be sections of the paper. In a thesis, each might be one chapter. In a dissertation, each part could require several chapters.

² In ordinary communication, this is often not true. What I say may not accurately represent what I intend to communicate. Because the Holy Spirit superintended the writing of the Scriptures, he ensured that the human authors wrote exactly what he intended.

Section 1: The introduction

The opening section provides framework for the study. It covers such elements as the boundaries of the passage, the reason for selecting it, problems in the text, scholarly views (short literature review) on the passage and its problems, a brief description of the research approach and an overview of the remainder of the study.

- *The passage.* Explain your reasons for choosing the text and how you delimited its boundaries.
- *The objectives.* The general objective of exegesis is to expose the meaning and significance of the biblical text. If your exegesis will focus on particular exegetical problems in the text, describe them; your objective will be to solve these problems.
- *The perspectives.* Summarise the major scholarly perspectives on text, especially vastly different approaches and alternate solutions to exegetical problems.
- *The plan.* Preview the remainder of the study, describing the approach, methodology and structure.

Section 2: The context

This part deals with all aspects relevant to the historical and the literary contexts of the book in which the selected passage is located. Most exegetical studies require a section devoted to the book in which the passage is located. This section should cover whichever of these elements are relevant to the research:

- *The general background of the book.* The general background encompasses issues related to the *authorship*, *date* and *audience* (recipients) of the book. Unless these matters are crucial to the argument, they can be addressed fairly briefly in the thesis.
- *The historical context of the book.* The historical context relates primarily to the quest for the *occasion* and *purpose* of the book. A secondary aspect of this section is to explain any aspects of the historical setting (milieu) of the book that are crucial to understanding its message.

- *The literary context of the book.* At this level, the literary context has to do with the book's *structure* and *argument* (i.e., flow of thought). How an interpreter understands the overall structure and argument of the book has an influence on how he understands the meaning of the passage.
- *The theological themes of the book.* For some studies, a survey of the major *themes* and *motifs* of the book is necessary. In particular, this section should analyse what the whole book teaches about themes relevant to the focal point of the selected passage.

Section 3: The meaning

This section is the heart of the exegetical study, consisting of an in-depth analysis of the text.

1. *Preliminary analysis.* The preliminary exegetical work entails two main tasks: analyse textual variants and translate the passage.

- *Textual criticism.* Examine textual variants and discuss any meaningful ones.
- *Translation.* If you are familiar with the original language, it is valuable to produce your own translation of the passage. Where difficult translation decisions have to be made, the translation should include notes explaining the problem, listing translation options and motivating the choice. If you are unable to produce your own translation, you may substitute by comparing various good translations. Write out the text of the translation you will be using as your main text together with notes discussing significant alternate renderings.³

2. *Contextual analysis.* Study the immediate historical and literary context of your pericope. You should give due attention to whichever of these aspects of the pericope context are relevant:

³ The translation is usually done in two phases. At the start of your study, produce a provisional translation. Then, after you have conducted an in-depth study, go back and refine the translation in the light of your observations.

- *Historical setting.* Determine the underlying historical occasion the author was addressing and analyse any historical or cultural allusions in the text.
- *Literary context.* Examine attention to the literary context of the passage, which includes the immediate context, the book context and the canonical context.

3. *Verbal analysis.* Investigate the actual words in the passage, their meaning (lexical analysis) and relationships (grammatical analysis).

- *Lexical.* Analyse the meaning of key words and phrases to discover their significance in the text.
- *Grammatical.* Examine any significant grammatical features in the passage (e.g., verb tenses, genitive phrases, conditional clauses, etc.).

4. *Literary analysis.* Examine the literary features of the passage to determine their influence on the meaning of the passage. Under the banner of “literary features” we include:

- *Genre.* Identify the general and specific genre of the passage and how it impacts upon the interpretation of the text; for example, if the text is Matthew 8:18-22, the general genre is “gospel”, while the specific genre is “pronouncement story”.
- *Structure.* Analyse the relationship between parts of the passage; techniques such as sentence diagrams or semantic structure analyses are helpful.
- *Composition.* For some texts and some studies, matters relating to traditions, sources, redaction and life-settings require investigation.
- *Rhetoric.* Examine the stylistic features of the text that may influence its meaning; these include compositional techniques such as figures of speech, repeated words, catch phrases and markers of emphasis.

4. *Exegetical synthesis.* In this section, you should begin to pull together your exegetical findings. The primary question you want to answer here is this: What was the author trying to communicate to his readers through the text? To answer this question, you might need to answer such questions as these:

- What are the major concerns or issues being addressed in the passage?

- What is the impact of the combination of genre, literary devices and structure on the meaning of the passage?
- What is the relationship between the motifs and the concerns of the passage?
- What is the relation of these motifs and concerns to the historical setting of the book?

The significance

No exegetical thesis is complete until it addresses the contemporary significance of the passage, answering the question: What difference does it make? This section may explore two kinds of significance: (a) theology and/or (b) application.

1. Theology: the doctrinal significance of the passage. Here the thesis should expound what the passage teaches us (a) about God, (b) about creation (especially ourselves) and (c) the relationship between God and creation.

- What universal truths (principles) does the passage teach?
- How does it harmonise with the whole teaching of Scripture?
- What contribution does it make to Christian doctrines?

2. Application: the practical significance of the passage. The study should make *at least one application* of the passage to contemporary Christianity. The application should focus on the central idea in the exposition of the passage.

- Identify the target group at which your application is aimed. Then give attention to how (a) the original meaning of the text can be explained to them and (b) you can help them connect with the truths of the text.
- Identify how the text applies to today's situation. The focus may be upon (a) the life of the individual Christian and/or (b) the life and ministry of the church.

In many institutions, exegetical studies do not include a major section on the significance of the text. Students are permitted to leave the research in the there-and-then without building bridges to the here-and-now. In my opinion, exegesis is not complete until it links the biblical text with the real work, the

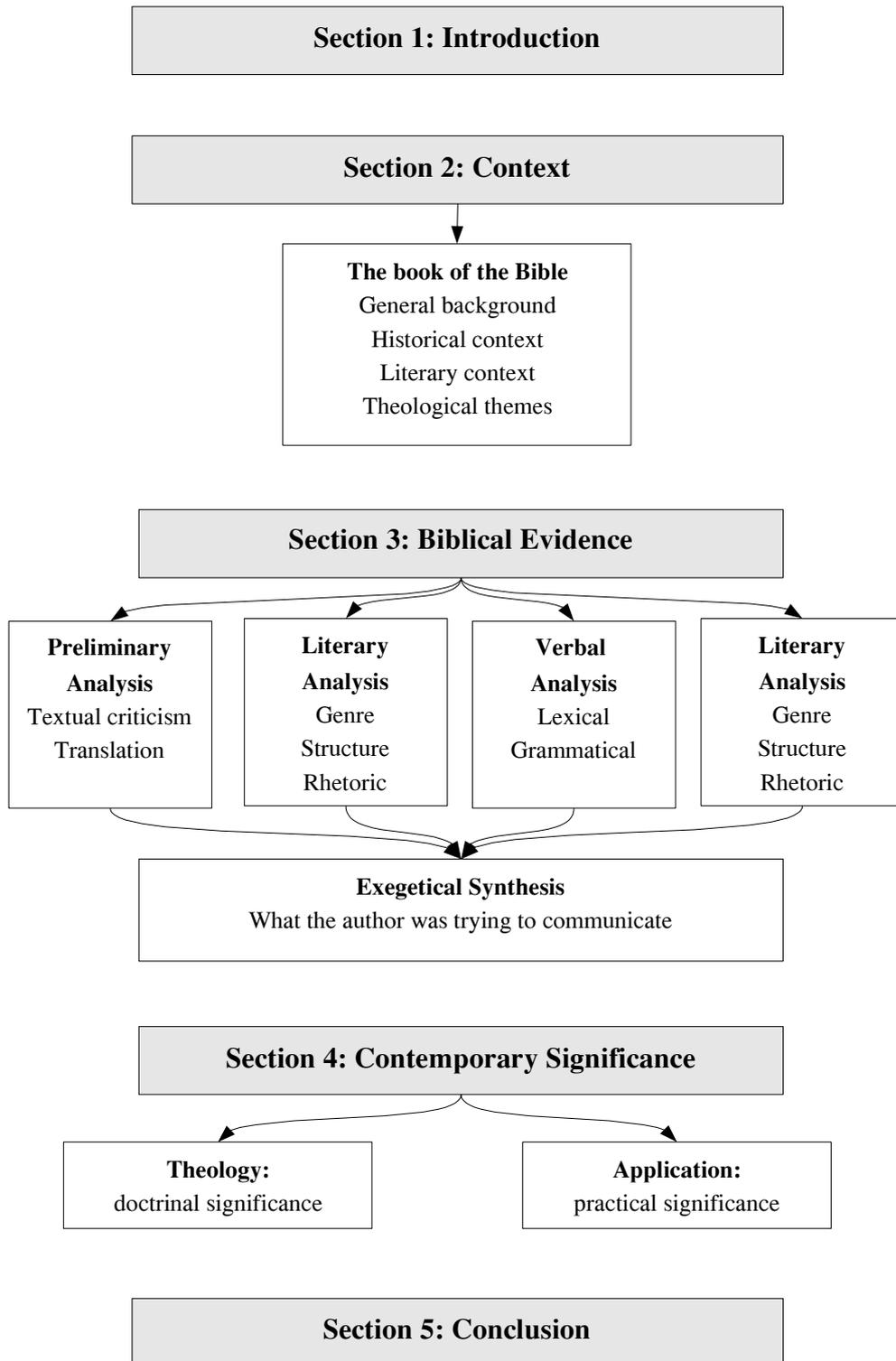


Illustration 1: Design for exegetical research

past with the present, allowing the ancient message to speak to our modern context. Since not all professors require (or even desire) this component, I recommend you ask your professor what he expects.

Section 5: The conclusion

The conclusion may or may not be a separate section of the study. In some exegetical studies, the significance section *is* the conclusion. It briefly summarises the exegetical findings, then closes with a discussion of the significance (doctrinal and/or practical) of those findings. In other studies, the conclusion is a separate, short section summarising the problem, process and findings of the study and possibly proposing further research.

Writing up an exegetical study

How should you write up an exegetical study? The answer depends somewhat on the length of the study. The exegetical design presented above outlines the logic of the study and the elements that typically fall under each main section, but it does not dictate the outline of the study. The most common way to organise the report on an exegetical study is what we call the commentary structure.

The commentary structure

This approach moves through the passage verse-by-verse, presenting relevant exegetical insights as they occur in the pericope. It needs an introduction section and a section discussing the overarching background issues, but it presents most of the exegetical details in the verse-by-verse discussion. The historical, cultural, redactional, grammatical, lexical and other types of observations are integrated in the commentary. Discussion of the significance, doctrinal and/or practical, may be integrated into the commentary or it may remain a separate section.

An exegetical study can be organised under the following categories:

1. Introduction
 - 1.1. The passage

- 1.2. The problems
- 1.3. The perspectives
2. Context of the book
 - 2.1. General background: author, date and audience
 - 2.2. Historical context: occasion, purpose and milieu
 - 2.3. Literary structure: structure and argument
 - 2.4. Theological: themes and motifs
3. Exegesis of the passage
 - 3.1. Text and translation
 - Present the working translation of the text (your own or an existing one) followed by notes discussing relevant textual variants and translation alternatives.
 - 3.2. Meaning for the original readers
 - Move through the text verse-by-verse discussing all the points relevant to its meaning, such as key words, grammar, customs, geography, rhetoric, redaction, etc.
 - 3.3. Significance for today's readers
4. Conclusion
5. Bibliography

An alternative to a commentary arrangement is a topical arrangement. This is less popular, but well suited to certain studies.

The topical structure

An alternative structure, a topical outline, uses each step in the exegetical process as a heading (or, in longer studies, a chapter). So, for example, under *grammatical analysis* you discuss all important grammatical features; composition might be discussed under a heading such as *redaction criticism*. The name “topical outline” derives from the fact that the analysis of the text is discussed under topics or in categories.

A topical study could be arranged under headings such as:

1. Introduction
2. Text and translation
3. Exegetical analysis

4. Contemporary significance
5. Conclusion
6. Bibliography

The body of the study falls under the heading “exegetical analysis” on the outline. This section presents exegetical data arranged under headings that represent steps in the exegetical process. The nature of the study dictates which headings are included. Any exegetical process might be used as a heading (e.g., lexical analysis, grammatical analysis, form criticism, literary context, discourse features, historical context, etc.).

Summary

Exegesis is a form of research. Its general objective is to uncover the text's author-intended meaning for the original readers and its significance for today's church. On occasions, its specific objective is to solve a particular interpretive problem in the passage. To achieve these objectives, it deploys a variety of exegetical methods as its research methods.

A detailed exegetical analysis of the chosen pericope lies at the heart of exegetical research. Preliminary study of the book in which the passage is located lays a foundation for the exegesis, while exploring its doctrinal and/or practical significance links the exegesis to the present.

There are two acceptable ways of writing up an exegetical study, namely, the commentary style and the topical approach. The commentary method proceeds verse-by-verse, presenting exegetical observations as they relate to the text. The topical approach arranges the main body of the study under topical headings.