



Writing Exegetical Papers

Westminster Theological Seminary
Center for Theological Writing

Biblical studies classes ask you to perform exegesis on a passage of Scripture from a redemptive-historical, biblical-theological perspective. Some assignments will emphasize exegesis more while others will put more weight on biblical theology. This handout focuses on exegesis, and it addresses the writing and research questions that students typically encounter. Please consult with your professor about the content and methodology of exegesis.

My Method for Writing Exegetical Papers.

The following method is intended to outline the different steps of writing an exegetical paper. Following steps means that you do not need to be thinking about *everything* all at once, but you can instead focus on one aspect of the paper at a time. This can even make writing an exegetical paper fun.

Note: I try to do each step in one or two sittings to keep my momentum up. After each step, I let the material sit a few days so that it can seep in.

1. Study the passage yourself.

Goal: To arrive at a well-informed summary of what you think the passage means, along with some crucial questions you need to answer

In prayerful reliance on the Holy Spirit, use every way you know to seek to understand the text. Do word studies, discourse analysis, etc. In a word doc (your “notes” doc), write down everything you observe, along with questions you have. Don’t attempt too much to organize these thoughts.

2. Study the secondary literature.

Goal: To get a sense of what general scholarship says about this passage, along with specific details that are useful for your paper

- a. In the same “notes” doc, make a list of all of the secondary resources that impinge on your text. Search the WTS library site, the ATLA religion database, Google Scholar, etc.
- b. Then, order these resources by what you think will be most helpful (high priority and low priority).
- c. Then look up as many of these as you can.
- d. As you read through each resource, take notes in your “notes” doc under the bibliographic reference for that resource. Mark the page number of each

point, and take down any quotes exactly. This frees you from needing to photocopy the materials. You need only rely on your notes.

- e. Don't attempt to figure out at this point where all of this information will fit in. Just relax and try to understand the person you are reading.
- f. Determine early on at what level you will read a given text. Is this something that seems insightful that I should read deeply? Or is it a scholarly rabbit trail that I should read in a cursory manner to get the main idea and a few details?

3. Outline your paper.

Goal: To figure out what you want to say (i.e., to clearly figure out the “big idea” of what you want to communicate, to figure out a coherent, logical structure for your paper, and to see in a general way how all of your details will fit in this structure)

- a. Spend time praying and thinking about all that you have observed yourself and learned from the scholarship. Peruse your “notes” doc, and figure what is the main point you want to say in your paper. Write this thesis statement down.
- b. Create a new word doc (your “outline” doc). Based on your thesis statement, figure out what the big points of your paper’s outline will be.
- c. Go through your “notes” doc. Put each useful observation or quote under whichever of your main headings you think it will be useful.
- d. Go over your outline. Get rid of anything that is not very useful. Cutting content at this stage is much easier than cutting it when you have written it.

4. Write your paper.

Goal: To complete a rough draft of your paper, focusing on how to communicate your ideas well

- a. Create a third word doc (your paper). Copy in the first section from your outline.
- b. Spend a little time rearranging the particular points in this first section until you exactly what you want to say.
- c. Write your paper, without caring too much about spelling, exact citation mechanics, etc. Put all citations in place as you go along, but keep them very rough. If you can’t remember where a certain Scripture passage is, put a “TODO” message in your footnote and move on. The goal is to keep your momentum up.
- d. Continue copying in sections from your outline until you are done.

5. Revise your paper.

Goal: To make sure your paper clearly says what you intend to say, and to make sure it adheres to the standards of style that you must keep

- a. Spell-check your paper.
- b. Re-read your paper, fixing all citations and other stylistic issues.
- c. Show your paper to someone else to read for mechanical issues.

Questions to Ask When Reading Your Text

1. Background Questions

- a. Who wrote this text? What can you learn about the background of the writer?
- b. To whom did they write it, in what historical circumstance, and for what purpose?
- c. What sources did the author(s) use when composing the text? Does this develop, nuance, or expand your understanding of its meaning?
- d. Does the text appear to have undergone editing or redacting process? Does this develop, nuance, or expand your understanding of its meaning?

2. Listening to the Text Questions

- a. What is the text about?
- b. What is the genre of the text? Does it contain a mixture of genres? (For example, a hymn within a letter, or a parable within a narrative)
- c. Translate the text from the Hebrew or Greek. If working with an Old Testament text, compare the Hebrew text to the Septuagint, Targums, or other ancient versions as time permits. How does your reading of the ancient languages shed light on your understanding?
- d. What key words do you need to investigate in order to clarify their meanings in the passage?
- e. Describe the literary structure of your text. Is there a development of argument, an ironic twist in the narrative, a contrast of images, a metaphor or allusion? What literary devices does the author use?
- f. What, if any, are the text-critical issues with your text? Are there any difficult readings you need to investigate?

3. Contextual Questions

- a. How does your section of text “sit” in the surrounding text? How does it function within the entire book of which it is a part?
- b. If your author has written other biblical books, how do those works inform your understanding of your text?
- c. What relationship does this text have to the larger canon of Scripture? Does it allude to or explicitly reference another passage of Scripture? Is your text referenced or alluded to by another passage? If there are no apparent allusions to other biblical passages, what is the relationship between the content, subject, or theme of your passage to other portions of Scripture?
- d. If your passage references other passages or is referenced by them, what hermeneutical strategy is employed by the Biblical writer? How does this help you understand that author’s perspective?
- e. Given the progressive nature of revelation, how might this passage have functioned at the various stages in redemptive history? For an Old Testament text, how might Israel have understood and used this text at various stages in its history? How would Jesus, New Testament writers, and the first Christians have understood this text? For New Testament texts, how is your text related to the specific events of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, to Pentecost and the expansion of the church? How does a New Testament text depend upon and relate to the Old Testament?

Using Secondary Sources

Using secondary sources (what other writers have said about your text) is necessary for responsible exegetical study. Carefully reviewing secondary source material will allow you to benefit from the study of many different thinkers. These sources should enable you to discover ideas, interpretations, and questions that you had not considered previously; they should also help you become conversant with the major interpretations of your passage. Allow the questions generated by your research to focus your continued study of the biblical text.

Because the exegetical paper is primarily an engagement with the biblical text, your reading of secondary research material should not overwhelm your own analysis and discussion of *the text*.

Rather, it should be a sustained engagement with your passage that clearly communicates your own conclusions about it and references secondary material in a way that elucidates your own study. The goal is to engage in a *conversation* that is focused on your text in *dialog* with secondary material.

Exegetical Tools

Select from the following the tools that will be most useful for understanding your passage.

1. Concordance

Some concordances are “exhaustive” (containing every reference of every word) while others are “concise” or “abridged” (containing only some instances of selected words). Most Bible software packages contain concordance capabilities. Concordances facilitate your investigation of the Bible by listing the occurrences of various words. They are available in multiple languages and versions. Check that you are using a concordance that corresponds to the version of the Bible you are using.

2. Lexicon

A lexicon is a dictionary for a language that conveys the meanings and forms of its words and expressions.

3. Bible Software (Bibleworks, Accordance, Logos, E-Sword)

4. Theological dictionaries

5. Bible atlas

6. Text critical apparatus

For help analyzing difficult textual questions, see Bruce Metger's *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*.

7. Commentary

- a. For help navigating Old Testament commentaries, see *Old Testament Commentary Survey* by Tremper Longman III.
- b. For help finding useful New Testament commentaries, see *New Testament Commentary Survey* by D.A. Carson.

8. Scholarly books

9. Journal articles

Written by Matthew Patton

The Center for Theological Writing
Montgomery Library, 2nd Floor, Room L-1
Andreas Center, Rm 413 § (215) 935-3867