

INTERPRETING THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXT

Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis

**DARRELL L. BOCK
AND BUIST M. FANNING**

EDITORS

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Introduction

Exegesis is not only a word that people rarely use; it is a course that is falling on hard times in many seminary programs. Once taken as a given for pastors and teachers of the Word, the interpretation and exposition of the NT rooted in a firsthand encounter with the original Greek has become rare in a world where languages can be translated by a computer and where high-quality English translations abound. Such realities raise questions like why exegete and why produce a textbook on NT exegesis.

The answer is simple. We exegete the Scripture because working with a text firsthand is the best way to get to know it. That does not mean the interpreter is not interested in the study others bring to the text. A good exegete is not an interpreter functioning alone on the island of his or her own thoughts. A good exegete, as we hope to show, engages others who study the text. A solid exegete has developed the science and art of assessing how the text is being handled, not just what it says. A competent exegete can explain the interpretive choices that have been made, as well as the options from which the choice emerged. All of this requires interaction with the Greek text and with the discussion that text has generated from others.

An exegete is able to have a conversation with the Bible where the very wording, structure, and presentation of the Bible directs the dialogue. The exegete can see and develop nuances that otherwise get lost in the move from Greek to the student's native language. To use a modern metaphor, exegesis is a high-definition form of reading and studying the Bible. The detailed pixels give color and depth to the message that the Bible contains. So a textbook on exegesis is a form of high-tech Bible study, where options and nuances are weighed and appreciated. What

emerges is one of the most fundamental skills for a teacher of Scripture, the ability to understand the Word *and* sort out the various views people affirm about its meaning.

In addition, exegesis takes more than simply “just doing it.” There are basic steps in doing exegesis. The more conscious one is of method, the more likely one will avoid the pitfalls that can come when one simply just does it. Often the most difficult aspect of interpreting is working carefully through the steps and articulating the rationale for why taking those steps is important to reading and interpreting, especially when it is a second language that is being studied.

This textbook is rooted in almost thirty years of teaching exegetical method at Dallas Theological Seminary, a post-graduate school of theology that has established a reputation for preparing students to study the Bible in the original languages. All the writers in the first section on exegetical method have taught the course on exegesis, many of them for over twenty years. The topics have been “field tested” in the classroom for that period and reflect a genuine team effort where the syllabus was shared as were lecture materials. Working hard on how to articulate this process to beginning students and trying to do it with clarity have been among the key goals of the class. The value of these team roots means that this text is not the reflection of a single person’s strengths or weaknesses (or hobby horses). Each topic was hammered out through departmental interaction and input. We believe the team character of the input has strengthened the results. The chapters reflect the work of the entire team, evidencing a cooperation in ministry and method that has made us all better for the effort.

Taking the chapters in Part One in isolation, however, obscures the kind of interconnected relationship these procedures have when one actually does exegesis. Some measure of artificial separation of the units here is required when teaching an introduction to exegesis, but these units coalesce more tightly as one gains experience with the method. As with learning any skill, practice brings improvement when accompanied by a desire to grow. This textbook is a little like participating in spring training. The basics are gone through in detail, step by step. Which steps and how much detail to apply becomes clear as one gains experience and begins to sense what a particular text requires. Thus, while exegesis is a science—that is, a skill to be learned—there also is an art to it. The art involves gaining a feel or possessing an instinct for what needs to be done with a particular text, that is, what procedures best fit that passage and what questions need to be answered. In the game that is exegesis, one does not follow the same pattern all the time, but draws on the basic skills worked on in spring training that are necessary to get to the goal, namely, a better understanding of the text’s message.

This text is designed to facilitate that process through carefully presented introductory essays on key elements of exegetical method in Part One, as well as through examples gathered from exegetes around the world in Part Two. The samples in Part Two give vivid illustrations of key elements of method or in some cases combinations of those elements. One can survey the brief summaries included with the chapters in Part Two to see which procedures are being illustrated in that essay in development of ideas presented in Part One.

We are all students. Students gather to learn. Just as we have taught each other and myriads of students working side by side to encourage each other in serious study of God's Word, so it is our hope and prayer that other equally motivated students will be introduced to the fascinating world of exegesis through the introduction this textbook provides. So open your Greek texts, and let's begin. May we see God's face and message as we interact with the inspired Word of God in Greek.

Opening Questions

1

Definition and Philosophy of Exegesis

DARRELL L. BOCK

For many students, taking an exegesis course is walking into a foreign world. Not only is the language of study not their own but even the word exegesis gives the feel of entering an alien land. However, when it comes to biblical study, there are few courses more fundamental than exegesis. Working firsthand with an ancient text in its original language gives a kind of direct access to the message of the New Testament that nothing else does. So in this chapter we hope to introduce you to the concept of exegesis, why it is important, the philosophy that stands behind it, and its relationship to the disciplines of theology and hermeneutics.

1.1 Definition of Exegesis

The term *exegesis* has its roots in the Greek term ἐξηγέομαι, which means “to lead out of” and so it means to “read out” the meaning of the text. It is to explain or interpret a text. It has two senses: (1) exegesis is a product, such as a technical commentary, and (2) it is a method of study. In this second sense, one “exegetes” a text through the use of various methods this book will explore in an initial way. It is both an art and a

science. Some elements of the exegetical process are as instinctive as an artist's work. The artistic exegete is able to ask the text the right set of questions and discern a passage's inherent conceptual unity with a clarity that also reveals a passage's depth. Exegesis also is a science, in that there are methods that can be applied to the text. These methods help the interpreter discover the information a text possesses. This volume hopes to discuss the methods of exegesis that make it a skill that can be taught, while also giving samples of exegesis that reveal what exegesis looks like in the hands of mature practitioners.

If we wanted to express the meaning of exegesis more precisely, we would define it as setting forth the authors'/text's meaning by interaction with the original language through the use of sound hermeneutics with a view to applying the text to the contemporary church and the world.

This definition has four key parts. First, the basic point in exegesis is to set forth the author's meaning as expressed in his text. The ambiguity of the definition in terms of the author/text makes the point that exegesis is not concerned with an author's state of mind or why he writes, as much as it is concerned with what he has said in the text he produced. Authorial intent has fallen on hard times in recent hermeneutical discussion for a variety of reasons, most of which relate to the difficulty of establishing what a standard of authorial intent means and discussion over how one can overcome the historical distance between an author and readers. Nonetheless, once one realizes that the pursuit of authorial intent is a function of validating or justifying between competing understandings and involves judgment as opposed to an airtight hermeneutical approach, much of the rationale for challenging the importance of pursuing the author evaporates. For it is a fact that we have a text because we had an author(s) who produced a text for us to seek to understand. Interpretation then very naturally should be concerned, at least initially, with what the author who produced the text sought to communicate through it.

Although the reader has to construe what the text affirms—and much attention in recent hermeneutical study is given to how a reader reads¹—the

1. One can think here of a series of technical hermeneutical texts where readers are a major concern: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994); Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980); idem, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998). In contrast to this stands a hermeneutical work that has been influential on much conservative evangelical hermeneutics, where the author and his intended meaning is the primary concern: E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967). Hirsch has also more recently discussed the role of the reader and issues

purpose of exegesis is to articulate what the author expressed, since the text is the “voiceprint” of an author. Even when we do not know an author’s exact identity, as is the case in a book like Hebrews, we can still examine his text for his meaning. One other element in this first portion of the definition is worth noting. It is the fact that the location of the apostrophe in “authors” follows the “s,” so we speak of the authors’ meaning. Here we allude to the fact that the New Testament ultimately is seen theologically to have two authors, the human author and the divine author who inspired the text. Often the importance of this distinction is not significant to exegesis, but what it does affirm is that there is an ultimate unity to the New Testament—its theology—and that the theological task ultimately moves in a canonical direction. An appreciation of the dual authorship of Scripture often is excluded in more confined definitions of exegesis, where only the historical setting of the human author is the concern. Such an appreciation of the complexity of biblical authorship raises its own unique problems in reading Scripture and makes it quite unlike reading any other book. There is a unity that exists among its human authors that the divine authorship provides. In addition, God knows where Scripture is going as a whole in a way that the Bible’s human authors did not appreciate. All of this means that good exegesis pays attention not only to the meaning of a passage in its “book” context but in its “canonical” context as well, where the correlation of texts across authors becomes an important concern.

The second key portion of the definition is the specification that exegesis involves work with the text’s original language. In the case of the New Testament, this means the Koine Greek of the text. Whereas those who interpret the Bible may work with the English or their own primary language, exegesis has generally been reserved for those who can interact directly with Greek. Knowledge of the language allows one a direct access to the expressions of the text and its lexical, grammatical, syntactical roots that working through a translation does not permit. Though it requires much labor to learn a language, the “payoff” is in gaining a level of access to the text and the way it structures itself that a mere use of one’s native language cannot attain.

The third element of the definition appeals to the use of sound hermeneutics. Here we read a text with sensitivity to its vocabulary, its grammatical expression, its historical setting, its literary genre and expression, its sociocultural context, and its theological scope. Much of this book discusses the methods that help one read with such sensitivities. Sound hermeneutics

of application in a way that represents a slight but important shift in his position, in “Meaning and Significance,” *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 202-25, and “Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory,” *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 549-67.

means making well-considered judgments about the text. In a world of competing interpretations, appreciating the process of validating a reading is one of the most important of exegetical skills to develop. Here learning how to ask the right questions of the text and how to pursue the answers, as well as being aware of what the text is not addressing or answering, is part of both the skill and the art of exegesis. Sound hermeneutics and careful interpretation involve a series of judgments. The careful exegete appreciates that dimension of exegesis and what the process of judgment means for the decisions made about how the text reads.

The final element of the definition states the ultimate goal of exegesis. In one sense, this movement to application is not part of the more technical definitions of exegesis, which focus only on explaining the text.² However, the character of the Bible itself is not merely to inform us about the past or even about God's work in the past, but to move its readers to be responsive to God and to live well and wisely as a result (2 Tim 3:16-17). So a more complete definition of exegesis, at least in terms of its function in the church, is to lay solid groundwork for application that is biblically informed. Therefore we shall have a chapter that discusses the movement to application that grows out of exegesis. Such movement to application is not always as easy or straightforward as some think. Exegesis is a good way to be sure we are not engaged in reading into the text (eisegesis) what is not there by being sensitive to the scope and setting of a given text. By carefully reflecting on the meaning of a text and the scope of what it addresses, we are in a better place to apply the text in ways that do not go beyond its intention.

As we have already suggested, exegesis deals with the terms of the text and presupposes the work of textual criticism in determining what the actual wording of the text is. Then the message of the text is pursued by working with the lexical terms and their usage through the examination of the terms in word study and through attention to the grammar expressed in the text. The contexts of how this expression appears in its historical, literary, and theological concerns are also important features to examine within exegesis. So we will have chapters examining these various levels of study and the process of making judgments about which of the possible meanings of a text is most likely its meaning. For the goal of validating the text exegetically is to set forth why one of the many possible ways to construe the text is in fact most likely the meaning that the author desired to convey. Once

2. For another work desiring to broaden the definition of exegesis and with a nice treatment of how the term has been defined in the last several centuries, see Stanley E. Porter and Kent D. Clarke, "What Is Exegesis? An Analysis of Various Definitions," in *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 3-21, esp. 9-18.

this exegetical meaning is in place, then the move to exposition and application can be made.

In sum, exegesis as a process has three basic outcomes: (1) to understand the message of the text, (2) to articulate why one thinks that is the text's message—both as a whole and in its particular details—(validation), and (3) to prepare for application(s) rooted in that biblical message.

The tools of exegesis include the Greek text, multiple translations (to surface options and exegetical disputes), a concordance (for word study), grammars and grammatical aids, extrabiblical texts (to help gain an understanding of the historical and cultural setting), lexicons and theological word books (to help with terms), and commentaries, especially technical commentaries (to serve as discussion partners about what the text means). Subsequent chapters will go into more detail about how each of these areas and the tools that go with them contribute to the exegetical process.

1.2 Why Exegesis Is Important

For those in Christian ministry, it is perhaps transparent that exegesis is important because understanding the meaning of the biblical text is one of the central responsibilities of someone who ministers and preaches the Word of God. Teachers in the church have a stewardship that makes exegesis a central element of ministry in seeking to serve God faithfully (2 Tim 2:15; Jas 3:1). There are several other reasons why exegesis is important.

There is a recognition even within the biblical text that some of the other texts written by biblical authors are not easy to understand. 2 Pet 3:16 calls some of Paul's writings difficult to understand. This difficulty means that sometimes effort and reflection need to be given to the text in order to ascertain its meaning.

Interaction within the Christian community and with those outside of it requires that the interpreter appreciate not only what is believed but how one determines that this understanding of a text is more adequate than another reading of it. A corollary to this is that the existence of false teaching also requires that one consider how to read the text accurately. The ability to explain how readings that undermine the text actually fail to represent the meaning well is an important skill for one who teaches in the church or gives instruction about its most sacred text (Tit 1:9).

The goal of the Spirit in inspiring the text is to lead the child of God into an adequate walk with God (2 Tim 3:15-17). Such a spiritual understanding of fellowship with God is supported by a serious engagement with the meaning of the inspired text. In a sense, one can well say that the Spirit works with the Word as a significant element of how he forms

us spiritually, and a proper understanding of the text is a key tool used to get us there.

1.3 A Philosophy of Exegesis: Appreciating How to Read Texts, Readers, and the Role of Communities

A proper philosophy of exegesis involves more than applying a bunch of rules to how we read the text. There needs to be an appreciation for what the writer of a text gives us and how the way a reader reads impacts what is seen in the text. In other words, the hermeneutics that goes into understanding a text involves reflection on the procedures one applies to the text, what we often understand as hermeneutics. However, a full appreciation of exegesis also considers how we as readers approach texts and how that impacts our reading. This aspect of hermeneutics considers the process of how and from what social, ideological, and/or ethnic location one reads and engages texts—the more philosophical side of hermeneutics. Both aspects of the hermeneutical process, what the text yields and what the reader sees and why, need attention by the careful exegete.

The beginning and most fundamental point for exegesis is a serious and careful consideration of the text and what the author sought to communicate through it. The author is the communicative agent most central to the interpretive task. The author produced the text, and articulating the meaning that author produced is the basic goal of the exegete. Such a view is not naïve or unaware of recent philosophical discussion. Rather, it is a recognition that an author deserves respect for having produced a text for readers to understand. Although many who work in hermeneutics today have banished the author from a central role in exegesis and have given a primary place to readers, such a move is not the most effective way to approach exegesis.³ A text is the recorded product of an author so that even if the author's identity is not known or the author is dead and unavailable, the text gives access to the author's expression and thought. This goal of determining the author's meaning through the text is the pursuit of a *what*. It is what the author seeks to affirm that is the goal of

3. A diverse set of theorists argue that the author and pursuit of authorial meaning are important. See, for example, Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* 201-80; G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 39; and Gary B. Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity: Figures and Themes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 25-39. Madison is a postmodern interpreter of the Anglo-American type (not a deconstructionist postmodern). He argues texts have meaning that can be determined and even gives ten criteria to use in finding it. These are: coherence, comprehensiveness, penetration, thoroughness, appropriateness, contextuality, agreement with language of author, agreement with (or better, sensitivity to) traditional readings of the author, suggestiveness, and potential.

the exegete, not a reproduction of a state of mind, as some who criticize authorial intent characterize the view. The reasons why the author speaks are also important, but only to the extent that they help us determine the scope, context, and content of what is said. Expressed in this way, the fundamental and indivisible linkage between the author and the text the author produced receives recognition as the most basic element of interpretation. In this way, even though we may not know the identity of the author, we still meet his presence and message in the text.

In making this affirmation, however, the reader is not banished to irrelevance in the interpretive process. Nor does the affirming of such a goal for exegesis mean there is a lack of recognition that getting to the author's meaning can be difficult and often is a matter for genuine discussion and debate. Exegesis is fundamentally a process that involves multiple judgments. A change of mind here and there can result in a very different reading of the text. However, it is important as we exegete that we are agreed as interpreters that the starting place for our dialogue is what the author of the text initially affirmed, because without such agreement it is difficult to know what we are discussing when it comes to treating issues of what the Bible meant and means.

On the other hand, readers read and are responsible for construing meaning. Interpretation is always a dialogue between interpreter and text. What a reader sees and how a reader reads is determined not only by what is in the text but by how the reader is prepared to read by his or her culture, theological perspective, personal background, and appreciation of the text's setting. As much as we may wish to try, we cannot make ourselves blank slates as readers when approaching a text. We are better off appreciating how this influences our reading than to pretend we can entirely neutralize these factors. Modern hermeneutical discussions have highlighted this feature of hermeneutics, maybe even exaggerated it. However, the role of readers was underappreciated previously and also needs attention as one thinks theoretically about the process of interpretation. Readings of the Bible in a pre-Copernican world would inevitably read texts on creation differently than we do. The amount of background we bring to the reading impacts how well we read. Many of the chapters in this book are designed to make the exegete more sensitive to the many levels in which one can get a better grasp of background, whether it be how Greek words are used, how customs worked, what the values of the first-century culture were, or how the author presents the argument. The goal of such methods is to make us better readers as we seek to recover the author's meaning.

One creative role the reader has as an exegete is when the move is made to set up application, because only the reader lives in the world in which the text is to be applied. This means that as one seeks how to apply the

Bible to modern questions about how one deals, for example, with television, movies, stem cell research, and other more modern questions, it is the reader's appreciation of how a text works and how it relates canonically to other texts on the theme that pulls the reader into a reflective yet creative theological process of seeking out the full theological perspective of Scripture. The issue of distinct cultural settings and contexts also enters into the reflective process at this point. So a reader is another important part of the process.

One way to check the undisciplined reading of a text is to appreciate that the Bible functions within communities of readers. We speak of communities because readers do not all share the same presuppositions in reading the Bible and often read it with their own ideological or theological concerns at the forefront. Such concerns may well skew the reading, but they may also open up fresh questions or angles from which the text in question should be read. So engaging the text with an awareness of these other positions is important not only to affirm the text but also to be in a position to explain where other readings may not reflect the text's meaning well.

From a historical point of view, the Bible has been read and studied for centuries. As such, some grasp of the history of its interpretation and of the interpretive history of given passages is helpful in acknowledging the centuries-long impact of Scripture. In addition, the dialogue about meaning carried out in a commentary tradition that also has a rich history is an important conversation partner in the process. In the chapters to follow, we shall indicate some of the more beneficial resources to surface this aspect of the process. Although the goal of exegesis is to make a student competent in making exegetical judgments, this goal is not reached by a kind of solitary exegesis in isolation from the discussion that has swirled around texts. These discussions often surface issues and questions that the exegete working alone never would have considered. They also serve as a check on the exegete's own biases in reading. There is a community dimension to exegesis that also deserves to be a part of the exegete's method.

So we have author-text, reader, and community to consider in the process of exegesis. The author establishes the meaning in the text, but the reader is left with the responsibility of construing that meaning and applying it in fresh contexts. By interacting with the various communities that read the text, the exegete gets a look at a variety of textual perspectives and may gain insight into questions the text raises that otherwise would have been ignored or missed. He or she may also be in a better position to discuss and evaluate readings that do not reflect what the author said.

1.4 Exegesis and Its Relationship to the Theological Disciplines

For people in the church there is a nagging question about exegesis. It is whether all this “academic” effort is required, since reading the Bible is a spiritual exercise that comes with the promised illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. Put crassly, one might ask, “Why exegete when the Holy Spirit is going to teach me anyway?” The reply is equally direct. It is that the Spirit’s work has less to do with understanding words and what language means than with appreciating, discerning, and accepting what is coming from God. The Spirit gives an “internal witness” to the Word so that we receive it as God’s Word as it convicts us of its basic content. This is what is stressed in Jesus’ remarks about the Spirit’s convicting work in John 16:8-11. In fact, the key passage on the Spirit’s illuminating work to give believers the mind of Christ speaks of actions like receiving (δέχεσθαι) the word (here referring to the apostolic preaching) and discerning (ἀνακρίνει) its content so that it is not foolishness to them (1 Cor 2:14-16). A consideration of the Jewish leadership shows that they understood Jesus’ claims cognitively, but never received them or discerned them to be true. So illumination has more to do with correlating God’s truth to the whole of Scripture and having a heart open to receive its content. In addition, a claim of illumination cannot be a guarantee that one has the content correct, because one can be wrong about whether one is illumined. Illumination, when it takes place, helps us get to meaning, but it also involves more than merely giving us the meaning. God used language to give us access to meaning. In that sense, the meaning of Scripture is available to any careful reader as a matter of comprehension. However, illumination allows us to hear that Word as promise, assertion, warning, command, or exhortation and then to be responsive to it from within. The Spirit works with the Word and opens our eyes and heart so we can more fully appreciate the text’s meaning and import. As such, exegesis is simply another way of saying we will carefully study and engage God’s Word. Our prayer is that the Spirit comes alongside to impress its content on our mind, heart, soul, and spirit.

Seen in this light, exegetical method then becomes the building blocks for interpretive, biblical, and theological work. Exegetical results are the raw elements that go into understanding a book or a biblical author and developing a biblical theology that appreciates the contribution of a specific biblical author. Exegesis also supplies the basic material for theological study as one correlates texts on topics and across books and authors into a systematic theology. Exegesis serves as the hub of pastoral reflection, standing at the base of sermons and spiritual development by shaping our thoughts and minds in directions God has given. Though hermeneutics is a broader discipline than exegesis, a major goal of hermeneutical un-

derstanding is that we be better prepared to be sensitive exegetes as we appreciate what both the author and the reader bring to the engagement of a text and what is required of the reader who construes that text.

1.5 Conclusion

Exegesis gives the student the unique opportunity to engage Scripture directly through the original language. It also enables the student to appreciate in a deeper way the nature of the debate and judgment that goes into construing a passage's meaning. Such careful study can deepen one's understanding of theology and God's message. Not only does the exegete gain an appreciation for what the text says, but also there is comprehension of the roads of debate and dialogue that surround the text and its details. In a sense, the exegete experiences the meaning of Scripture in all its colors and hues, more like a high-definition television portrait than a black-and-white image. In sum, the careful exegete can articulate what the text means and why. He or she can also explain why others may see it differently. Such are the skills and artistry of the mature theologian-exegete. May their tribe increase.

1.6 For Further Reading

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