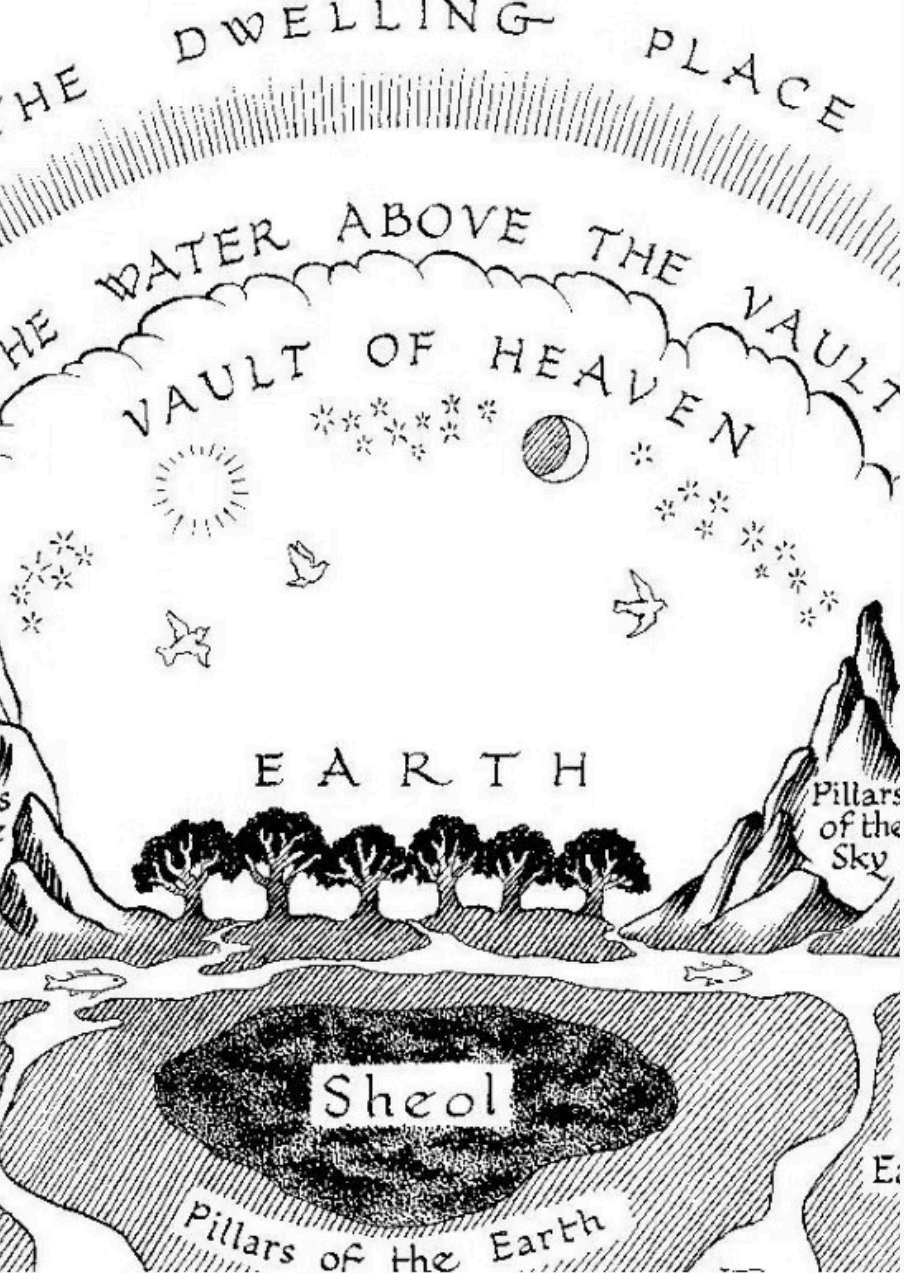




Biblical Exegesis: A Comprehensive Guide to Understanding Scripture

This comprehensive guide introduces you to the fundamental principles and methods of biblical exegesis—the careful, scholarly interpretation of Scripture. Whether you're a seminary student, pastor, or serious Bible reader, mastering these skills will transform how you engage with God's Word and help prevent what we call "exegetical illiteracy."

Understanding the Challenge

Three Critical Warnings

Before we begin this journey, three important warnings must be stated clearly:

First, while the elements and steps are simple, mastering the process is difficult. It requires hard work, trial and error—but the difficult work will be rewarding.

Second, this method is not the only way to think or write about the Bible. Many other approaches can be used by modern interpreters. What we present here is a basic, yet carefully historical, literary, and theological analysis.

The Purpose

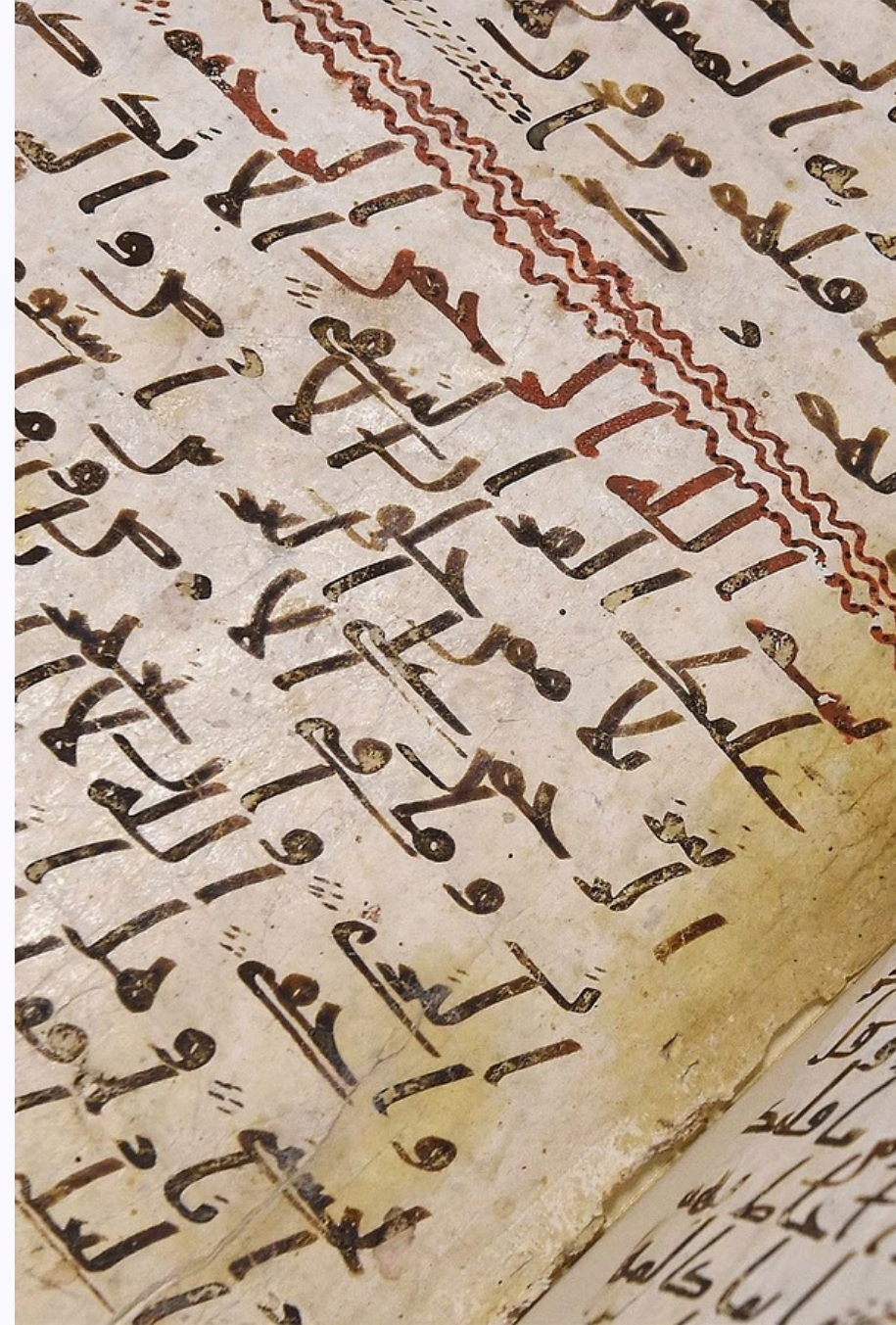
Third, this study does not claim to replace more detailed works on biblical interpretation, specific literary genres, or hermeneutics.

Our goal is straightforward: to help prevent the lack of instruction in exegesis among common readers, teachers, and preachers of the biblical text. The task is becoming so complex that many are tempted to abandon becoming deeper readers of Scripture—and when this happens, everyone suffers immense losses.

What is Exegesis?

Exegesis comes from the Greek word ἐξήγησις (exēgēsis), from ἐξηγεῖσθαι (exēgeomai), meaning "to lead out." It is a critical interpretation or explanation of a text, particularly a religious text. While traditionally used for biblical interpretation, today we specify "biblical exegesis" to distinguish it from other forms of textual analysis.

The resulting meaning is the exposition of a word, sentence, paragraph, or entire book, leading to the true and exact meaning of the text. The best way to do this is to return to the original source material in which the document was written.



Exegesis: Science and Art

As Science

Exegesis is based on certain hermeneutical principles necessary to correctly interpret the meaning of the biblical text. It follows systematic methods and established principles.

As Art

Exegesis involves the skillful application of hermeneutical principles. It requires intuition, imagination, sensitivity, and those discoveries that benefit from careful observation and sometimes fortunate insights.

As Lifelong Task

Exegesis is something for a lifetime—a task of constant interaction between the biblical text and its appropriate exposition. It leads and provides content to systematic theology, practice, history, and biblical exposition.

Three Dimensions of Exegesis

Investigation

Exegesis is an investigation of the many dimensions or threads of a particular text. It's the process of asking questions of the text—questions often provoked by the text itself.

The basic question we're always asking is: "What is happening here?" Exegetes must learn to enjoy asking questions.

Dialogue

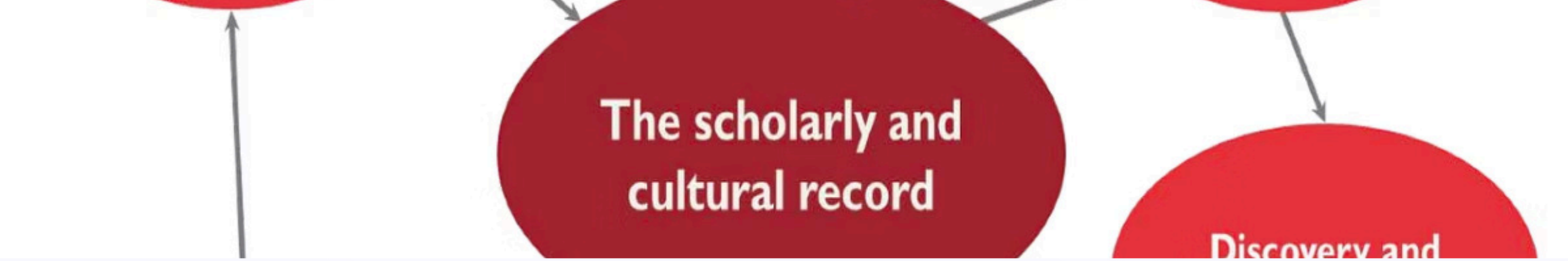
Exegesis is a dialogue with living and deceased readers, more or less educated, absent or present. It's a dialogue about texts and their contexts, about sacred words and their claims.

As dialogue, exegesis presupposes listening to others, even those with whom we disagree. The isolated reader is not an ideal biblical exegete.

Art

Good reading—like good dialogue or any good investigation—is more art than science. While there are principles and steps to follow, knowing what to ask the text requires intuition, imagination, and sensitivity.

The task of exegesis requires enormous intellectual and spiritual energy.



**The scholarly and
cultural record**

Discovery and

Three Basic Approaches to Exegesis

Today there are perhaps three basic approaches to exegesis. Understanding these different methodologies will help you appreciate the diversity of biblical scholarship and choose appropriate tools for your own interpretive work.

The Synchronic Approach

Focus on Final Form

The synchronic approach (meaning "with time" or "same time") analyzes only the final form of the text as it appears in the Bible, as we read it today. It's not interested in the "prehistory" of the text.

Key Methods

- Literary criticism—understanding the text as literature
- Narrative criticism—examining formal features of stories
- Rhetorical criticism—identifying persuasive strategies
- Lexical and grammatical analysis—studying words and forms
- Socio-scientific criticism—exploring social contexts

Example Questions

For the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): What are the various parts of the Sermon, and how do they fit together? How might first-century readers/hearers have understood this Sermon?

The Diachronic Approach

Focus on Development

The diachronic approach (meaning "through time") focuses on the origin and development of the text. Often called the historical-critical method, this was the approach chosen by many biblical scholars in the 20th century.

Key Methods

- Textual criticism—searching for original wording
- Form criticism—identifying oral/written tradition types
- Tradition criticism—understanding tradition growth over time
- Source criticism—discovering written sources used
- Redaction criticism—examining how authors adapted sources
- Historical criticism—investigating surrounding events

Example Questions

For the Sermon on the Mount: What written or oral sources did the evangelist adopt? How do these teachings represent the words or ideas of the historical Jesus?

The Existentialist Approach

Focus on Engagement

The existentialist approach is interested primarily in the text as something to engage with—not just the text itself. These methods are "instrumental": they allow the text to be read as a means to an end, not as an end in itself.

Key Contexts

- Theological exegesis and spiritual reading
- Canonical criticism—within the Bible as a whole
- Embodiment or actualization—appropriating the text
- Liberation exegesis—seeking justice or liberation

Example Questions

For the Sermon on the Mount: What kind of contemporary faith and practice does this call readers to? What practices are necessary to live this message in the contemporary world?



The Seven Elements of Our Method

The approach advocated in this study is somewhat eclectic yet integrated, based on insights and methods from all three basic approaches already mentioned. The process proposed presents seven basic elements, recognizing that the actual process of reading and interpreting is more like a circle than an outline—the "hermeneutical circle."

Overview: The Seven-Step Process

01	02	03
Survey Preparation and overview or introduction to the text and its context	Contextual Analysis Consideration of the historical and literary contexts of the text	Formal Analysis Examination of the form, structure, and movement of the text
04	05	06
Detailed Analysis Study of the various parts of the text in depth	Synthesis Bringing together the text as a whole	Reflection Considering the contemporary significance of the text
07		
Refinement and Expansion Enhancing and broadening the initial exegesis		

Working with Biblical Texts

Choosing Your Text

One of the most difficult and important decisions for the exegete is choosing which biblical passage will be the focus of a particular exegetical investigation.

Look for texts with clear beginning and ending markers—indicators of a complete unit of thought.

The passage should generally be between five and twenty verses, depending on the depth of your work.

Using Translations Wisely

For exegesis based on a text in English (as opposed to original languages), a translation based on formal equivalence theory is better for two reasons:

1. It allows you to see more of the original ambiguities in the text
2. It generally presents a recurring keyword in the original with the same translated word in English

However, examining several translations can be very useful, as differences suggest possible interpretations—each with strengths and weaknesses to be analyzed.



Step 1: Survey and Initial Questions

The initial process of surveying and questioning the text in its context offers the reader "reconnaissance of the terrain" and encourages preliminary observations and questions for investigation. Unlike textbooks or essays, the Bible doesn't have original chapter titles or subtitles—those found in many Bibles are the work of editors.

The first step in interpretation is to read the passage several times, ignoring section headings or at least recognizing they are just other readers' work. Read in multiple translations, read aloud, and read the text within its broader context. As you read, note observations and questions that come to mind.

Forming Your Initial Hypothesis

1

First Impressions

As you complete your first readings, you'll begin forming initial impressions of meanings. Ask yourself: What is the theme? What thematic perspective does it present? What role might it play in the book as a whole?

2

Examining Presuppositions

Recognize any prior understanding—or prejudice—about the text. Do you know this text? What memories or feelings does it bring? How might your social and theological position affect your relationship with it?

3

Working Thesis

This should result in formulating your working thesis about the text's meaning. This thesis will be constantly revised and reformulated as your exegetical work progresses. Good scholars seek facts that might refute their hypotheses.



Step 2: Historical and Literary Context

A text without context is a pretext. Context is so crucial to interpretation that if you change the context of a word, phrase, or paragraph, you also change the content of that text. People communicate within a social network, located in a particular culture and political situation, at a specific point in time.

We must examine both historical contexts (including sociopolitical and cultural) and literary contexts (including rhetorical). Understanding these contexts is one of the most challenging aspects for non-scholars, yet it's absolutely essential.

Understanding Historical Context

Key Questions to Ask

- What are the main characteristics of the people (the "community") to whom the passage was directed?
- What ancient events, political realities, places, customs, values, and beliefs are mentioned or alluded to?
- What circumstances or situations may have led the author to write the text?

Resources to Consult

Use biblical dictionaries, study Bibles, commentaries, and scholarly articles. Modern scholars adopt approaches from history and social sciences like sociology and cultural anthropology.

Be careful not to go beyond the evidence. The careful exegete wants to be sure reconstructions don't result in exegesis built on a house of cards.

Understanding Literary Context

Immediate Context

What precedes and follows the passage?
How does the material leading up to your text connect to it?

Broader Context

What section of the book is the passage in? Where does it occur within the book's structure? What has "happened" in the book up to this point?

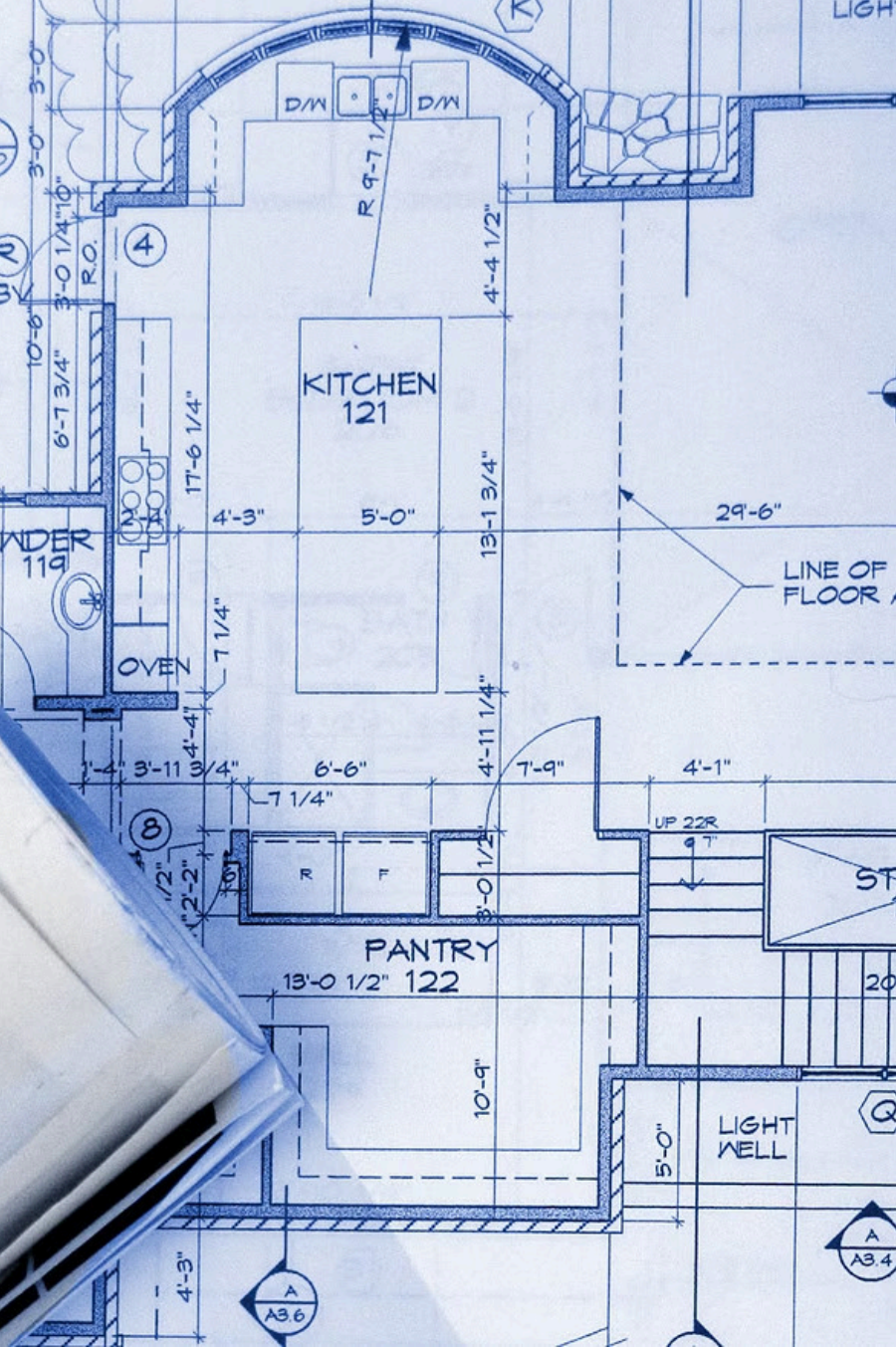
Rhetorical Context

Why is the text located where it is? What effect did it produce on readers by virtue of its position within a larger discourse?

Canonical Context

What role does this text play in the rest of Scripture? How does it relate to other texts in the other Testament?





Step 3: Form, Structure, and Movement

It's impossible to participate in any game without deeply knowing the laws that govern it. Similarly, understanding the literary form, structure, and movement of a text is essential. This is what we call formal analysis—examining how texts are arranged and how they progress from beginning to end.

The elements of design—structure, patterns, and so forth—represent the artistic beauty of a text and its intended function or impact.

Identifying Literary Form

Genre Matters

Just as you read a newspaper's front page differently from the comics or advice columns, different biblical genres must be interpreted differently. Is it prose or poetry? Narrative or letter? Parable or genealogy?

Common Forms

Biblical forms include: historical narratives, prophetic oracles, hymns, proverbs, parables, letters, apocalyptic visions, genealogies, miracle stories, and many more. Each has its own characteristics and interpretive principles.

Why It Matters

Reading apocalyptic literature like Daniel or Revelation as straightforward historical narrative causes all kinds of interpretive havoc. These texts use generous symbolism and should be read more like poetry than video recordings of the future.

Discovering Structure and Movement

Common Structural Patterns

The most basic pattern is **repetition** (A-X-A-Y-A-Z).

Another common pattern is **contrast or antithesis** (A and opposite of A).

Parallelism—expressing something similar, related, or contrasted in parallel form—is very common in biblical poetry.

Inclusio occurs when a word, phrase, or idea both introduces and concludes a text (A-B-A').

Chiasm is when a text is structured in parallel from both ends, with elements at the "top" and "bottom" corresponding (A-B-C-B'-A').

Understanding Movement

How a writer uses structural patterns indicates the movement of the text from beginning to end. The movement describes relationships between parts and how they develop step by step.

Common movement patterns include:

- Description—general to specific details
- Explanation—topic followed by sequence of ideas
- Logic—if/since... then
- Comparison/contrast
- Problem to solution

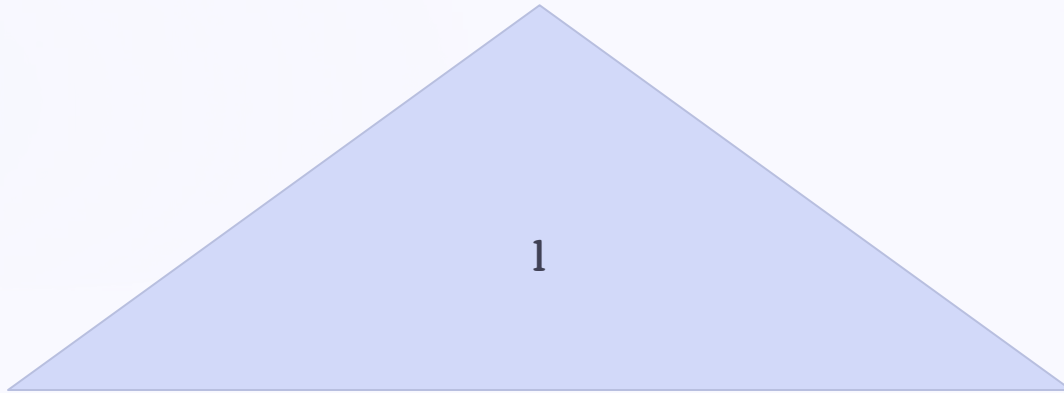


Step 4: Detailed Analysis of the Text

Detailed analysis is the very heart of exegesis. It's the *sine qua non*—the most essential resource of careful reading: a thorough examination of each word, phrase, allusion, grammatical question, and syntactic feature in the text. This is what provides material for commentaries and is the heart of exegesis.

However, the careful interpreter is always asking: "What do the details mean in the bigger picture, and how does the bigger picture affect the meaning of the details?"

The Puzzle Pieces: Understanding the Parts



The Text as a Whole

Segments (paragraphs/strophes)

Sentences (complete thoughts)

Phrases (segments of sentences)

Words (lexical items)

Making exegesis is like assembling a puzzle. To assemble a puzzle, you must fit the small pieces (details) to create a picture (the whole). The process involves identifying the parts and discovering how they fit together. Without the small pieces, there would be no complete picture—but the small pieces alone are just a tiny part of the bigger picture.

Analyzing Keywords and Images

Meaning in Context

We must treat each keyword or image as an unknown variable. However, the meaning of a word depends on context. The expression "Oh, my God!" has one meaning in prayer and quite another in expressing amazement.

A word has a range of possible definitions (semantic field). The meaning depends on various contexts: the social environment, the speaker's vocabulary and style, and the literary and rhetorical setting.

Avoiding Common Errors

Illegitimate totality transfer: Don't assume a word carries all its possible meanings at once in a particular context.

Etymological fallacy: A word's current meaning may have nothing to do with its historical origin. "Enthusiasm" today doesn't mean "having God within" despite its roots.

Anachronistic reading: Don't impose modern meanings on ancient words without considering historical usage.

Steps for Interpreting Words in Context

1

Consult Lexicons

Use a good biblical dictionary or lexicon to determine the spectrum of possible meanings (semantic field) of the word.

2

Use Concordances

Locate all occurrences of that word and related words in the biblical book or by the same author.

3

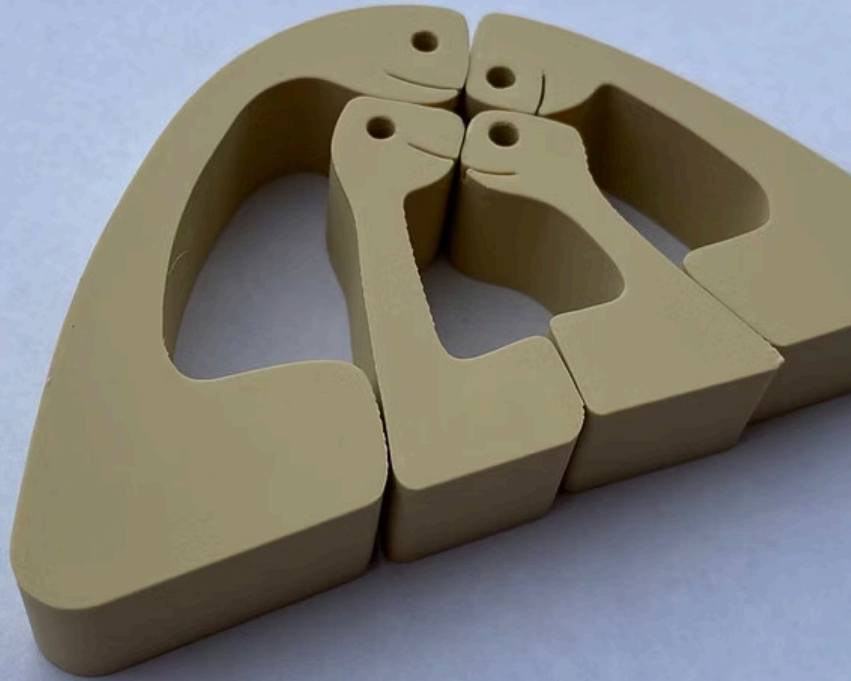
Examine Each Occurrence

Carefully study each occurrence of the word/word family in its context to identify its meaning in each setting.

4

Return to Your Text

Using insights collected, return to the word in your selected passage. Determine its meaning in this specific context.



Understanding Phrases and Sentences

Words normally don't appear alone—they're arranged in larger groupings: phrases and sentences. The arrangement of words in phrases and phrases in sentences is known as syntax. The primary linguistic unit for expressing meaning is not the word or phrase, but the sentence.

Key Questions

- What are the main sentences in the text?
- How do these sentences relate to each other?
- Is their order significant?
- What types of verbs appear (action or state)?
- What are the verb tenses and moods?
- Are verb phrases coordinated or subordinated?

Types of Relationships

Chronological/narrative:

simultaneous action ("while"), prior action ("before"), subsequent action ("then")

Logical: condition ("if"), reason ("because"), purpose ("so that"), result ("therefore"), means ("by")

Comparison/contrast: similarity and difference

Sources and Intertextuality

Biblical Intertextuality

Most biblical books use previous sources—oral, written, or both. The Bible is an intertextual fabric where later texts build upon pre-existing texts. For the New Testament, the most important dimension involves hundreds of quotations and allusions to the Old Testament.

Cultural Intertextuality

Biblical authors sometimes draw on extrabiblical texts and frequently on sociocultural realities outside texts. They may quote ancient proverbs, mention historical figures or events, or allude to imperial imagery and practices.

Using Sources Wisely

When you identify a source, ask: What texts, themes, or images does this passage quote or allude to? What aspects of the quoted passage's context inform its use here? For what purposes does the passage use this material?

Narrative Details and Characters

Since most of the Bible is narrative literature, analyzing narrative details requires special attention. Contemporary literary criticism is interested in the final form of the narrative text—how it communicates the story.

Elements of Narrative

1. Introduction (setting, occasion)
2. Rising action (development, conflict)
3. Climax
4. Falling action
5. Resolution (denouement, conclusion)

Together, these elements form the plot of the narrative.

Character Development

- Who are the characters?
- How do they develop?
- What roles do they play?
- Who is the protagonist? Antagonist?
- What conflicts exist between characters?
- How does the story begin, climax, and end?



Step 5: Synthesis–Bringing It All Together

After careful detailed analysis, synthesis brings together the text as a whole. This is where your working thesis becomes a clear statement–your final interpretation of the text. The synthesis should briefly summarize:



Main Theme

What is the central message or primary point of the text?



Supporting Elements

How do the various parts work together to communicate this message?



Context Connection

How does this text function within its larger literary and historical contexts?



Theological Significance

What theological or spiritual truth does the text convey?



Step 6: Reflection on Contemporary Significance

Two Horizons

Most exegetes keep their eyes on "two horizons"—the world around the biblical text itself, and the world of their own personal and communal experience.

This is both normal and appropriate, though there are more responsible ways to engage these two horizons than others.

Bridging the Gap

Theological reflection asks: How does this ancient text speak to us in our different yet similar context? What does it require of contemporary readers?

Consider:

- What challenges does this text present to contemporary faith and practice?
- How might this text address current issues in church and society?
- What spiritual practices does this text suggest or require?

Step 7: Refinement Through Dialogue

The final step involves refining and expanding your initial exegesis through dialogue with other interpreters—past and present. This doesn't mean abandoning your own insights, but testing, correcting, and enriching them through engagement with the scholarly community.

Consult Resources

- Academic commentaries
- Biblical dictionaries and encyclopedias
- Scholarly articles and monographs
- Study Bible notes
- Works from various interpretive traditions

Maintain Balance

Remember: you use these sources to expand, correct, and refine your own initial exegesis. This enables you to learn and contribute to the dialogue about the text in your own unique way more effectively than those who start with interpretations rather than the text itself.

Throughout your written exegesis, constantly interweave your own insights with the ideas and corrective influences of others.

The task of exegesis requires enormous energy—both intellectual and spiritual—but the difficult work will be rewarding. As you practice these methods, you'll develop skills that will serve you throughout a lifetime of engaging with Scripture.