

FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE METHODS AND RESULTS/FINDINGS OF BIBLICAL EXEGESIS AND HERMENEUTICS

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Introduction

WE ALL ENGAGE in exegesis and hermeneutics. We do this when, on daily basis, we seek to understand the meaning of what we hear, read, or even touch and feel with our senses. In a technical sense, we also engage in biblical exegesis and hermeneutics each time we seek to understand what a particular Bible passage means. The process through which an interpreter brings out the original meaning of a Bible text is called exegesis whereas the process through which an interpreter makes the same Bible text speak to the contemporary time is called hermeneutics.¹ In the light of the rigorous and complex processes involved in biblical

¹Charles E. Carter, "Opening Windows onto Biblical Worlds: Applying the Social Sciences to Hebrew Scriptures," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 446; Stuart Douglas, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3d ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 1.

exegesis and hermeneutics, Paul's instruction to Timothy is therefore instructive: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who *correctly* handles the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15, NIV, italics mine).

Exegesis is derived from the Greek verb, *exêgeomai*, meaning "to lead out of," "to extract," and hence "to interpret." This verb is used six times in the NT (Luke 24:35; John 1:18; Acts 10:8; 15:12, 14; 21:19). On the other hand, hermeneutics is derived from the Greek, *hermêneuo*. Its compound form, *dihermêneuo*, "to interpret," "to explain," and "to translate" is used six times in the NT (Luke 24:27; Acts 9:36; 1 Cor 12:30; 14:5, 13, 27).¹ Exegesis and hermeneutics are related in the sense that the earlier provides the raw material for the later. Because of this, it is practically impossible for a biblical student to engage in one and neglect the other.

The goal of exegesis and hermeneutics, therefore, should be to open (unlock) the Bible so that the reader can enter into it and understand it, or better still so that the modern reader can hear the voice of the living God² in any given Bible passage. In order to achieve this goal, the practise of exegesis and hermeneutics must be engaged in consciously, not subconsciously; intelligently, not unintelligently; deliberately,

¹See Kenneth D. Mulzac, "Methods, Steps, and Tools in Interpretation," *Asia Adventist Seminary Studies* 5 (2002): 26; Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Mosés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Manila: OMF, 1998), 19-21; Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3d ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 1.

²Craig C. Broyles, "Interpreting the Old Testament: Principles and Steps," in *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis*, ed. Craig C. Broyles (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 13.

not unintentionally; carefully, not carelessly; more objectively, and less subjectively.

Exegesis and hermeneutics are both sciences and arts. Both are sciences in the sense that they are objective. Consequently, exegesis and hermeneutics are expected to be precise and exact, measured, governed by rules, empirical (testable and verifiable). On the other hand, exegesis and hermeneutics are arts in the sense that they are subjective. Consequently, both involve the use of human emotions, feelings, and intuition to some degree.

It is therefore necessary to point out here that the need for exegesis and hermeneutics to be more objective does not, of necessity, preclude subjectivity. This is because none of the modern readers approaches the Bible from a *tabula rasa*, “blank slate” perspective. On the contrary, every modern reader approaches the Bible with a certain degree of pre-conceived ideas, cultural orientations, and personal biases. In the end, what one perceives the Bible as saying tends to be coloured by these idiosyncrasies.¹ This is in harmony with the view: “The exegete may be tempted to read the text in light of his/her own tradition without critical judgment or without letting the text speak afresh on its own.”²

In view of the foregoing, this study seeks to discuss the factors that affect the methods and results/findings of the exegesis and hermeneutics of the Bible texts. It also seeks to briefly illustrate how these factors operate in selected

¹Michael Onyedikachi Akpa, “Contextualizing Paul’s Writings in Ministry: Proposed Guiding Principles,” *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry* 3 (2011): 127-128.

²Mulzac, 26.

examples of issues and passages of Scripture. This paper employs the contextual method, allowing the contexts of the issues or Bible passages presented to determine how the various factors presented in the paper affect the exegesis and hermeneutics of the Bible. Because of its scope, this paper does not engage in detailed discussions that border on such issues as methods, steps, and tools for doing biblical exegesis and hermeneutics since these are already covered in other reliable scholarly works.¹ The purpose of this paper is three fold: (1) to enumerate and discuss the factors that affect the methods and findings of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics, (2) to alert the readers and students of the Bible on the dangers of taking every information from biblical exegetes as authentic without subjecting such to adequate scrutiny, and (3) to provide the reader with a framework with which he can assess the methods and findings of biblical exegetes so as to determine the level of objectivity and reliability of their methods and findings.

The Need for Exegesis and Hermeneutics

Mulzac has established the need for undertaking the exegesis and hermeneutics of the Bible by pointing out six basic gaps that exist between the Bible times and the contemporary time. According to him, these gaps include the

¹For details on such issues, see the following exemplary but worthy sources: Fee, 5-131; Douglas, 5-163; Mulzac, 25-42; Michael Onyedikachi Akpa, *The Identity and Role of Michael in the Narrative of the War in Heaven: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Revelation 12:7-12* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2010), 170-244; Lee J. Gugliotto, *Handbook for Bible Study: A Guide to Understanding, Teaching, and Preaching the Word of God* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1995), 20-373; John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 169-195.

following:

1. The “Third Party Perspective.” None of the Bible was originally addressed to the modern reader and interpreter.
2. The Language Gap. None of the Bible was originally composed in a modern language.
3. The Cultural Gap. Modern readers of the Bible and the original readers of these texts were separated by an enormous cultural gap.
4. The Historical Gap. The modern world is separated from the world of the Bible by anywhere from two to over three millennia.
5. Multiple Texts. For some documents there are several manuscripts that show variation in content, arrangement, and so forth. The oldest copies of the OT and the NT that we possess are copies made some time after the original documents were written.
6. Unique Category. Since the Bible consists of sacred text, in some sense it involves more than treating it as good literature or as a classical work. People hold opinions about classical works; they hold convictions about Scripture.¹

In addition to the above, exegesis and hermeneutics are needed in understanding the Bible for several other reasons. First, the Bible contains clarities and paradoxes. There are issues in the Bible that are very clear to the reader even on

¹Mulzac, 25-26. On the idea of a gap of two to three millennia between the time of the Bible and the contemporary time, see also D. A. Carson, and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 23.

surface reading. However, there are other issues in the Bible that are paradoxical, requiring conscientious deep study to understand. For example, when the Bible says, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14; James 2:8), the implication of this teaching is clear; one needs to love oneself in order to be able to love others as well. However, when Jesus says that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt 19:24)¹ or that “many that are first will be last, and the last first” (Matt 19:30),² these are paradoxical statements that require a more thorough and systematic study to understand.

Second, the Bible contains absolute and relative issues. Some issues in the Bible are not subject to change under any circumstance, time, or place whereas there are issues in the Bible that are bound to time, place, and circumstance. An intentional Bible study will reveal these. For instance, when God said, “You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery.

¹A study of the above passage in context indicates that Jesus is highlighting the “difficulty” involved in a rich man entering into the kingdom of God, and not “the impossibility” as it may appear on the surface. In the human realm, it might appear impossible for a camel to go through the eye of the needle. But in the realm of God, it is possible for the camel to pass through the eye of the needle as well as for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God (Matt 19:26). Note that “all things” (Grk. πάντα) in the passage actually refers to the two events; namely, the camel going through the eye of the needle and the rich man entering into the kingdom of God.

²The paradox in this statement is explained by Jesus’ parable on the labourers in the vineyard in Matt 20:1-16. In the parable, the Landowner paid those He hired first last and those He hired last first (Matt 20:8).

You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's" (Exod 20:13-17). He did not have the Jews exclusively in mind. These are absolute commands from God that stand irrespective of race, culture, place, or time. However, the sanctuary services, the priestly and levitical orders, and the sacrificial systems of the OT are relative in the sense that they were God's temporary measure of dealing with the problem of sin, with Israel as the main focus. Most importantly, they pointed to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary (Col 2:13-17) and thus, are not required of believers after the Cross. This does not in any way set the entire OT at naught (see Matt 5:17-19). Care should be exercised by the exegete to see aspects of the OT that are absolute and which aspects are relative.

Third, the Bible contains both divine and human aspects. There are certain aspects of the Bible that tell of what God did whereas other aspects tell of what human beings did. There are at least two instances where animals spoke in the Bible: the serpent (Gen 3:1-5) and the donkey (Num 22:27-30). In fact, there are aspects of the Bible that tell what Satan said or did (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). Therefore, care should be exercised to segregate such.

Fourth, the Bible contains literal and figurative or symbolic expressions. Narratives in the Bible utilise more of literal and concrete modes of expression. The story of Creation, the Fall, the Flood, the call of Abraham, the Exodus, the birth of Jesus Christ, the missionary journeys of Paul and his companions are all literal events reported in literal and concrete modes of expression. The books of Daniel, Revelation, parts of Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Matthew

for example, contain symbolic and figurative imageries that require a careful study to uncover their meanings. There are also other figures of speech and literary devices used in presenting issues in the Bible. For example, the Bible contains parables, prophetic utterances, apocalyptic imagery and symbols, hymns and other forms of poetry, enacted parables (drama), rhetoric questions, diatribe, and dialogue. A careful exegete needs to identify when any of these is used. Having described biblical exegesis and hermeneutics and having established the need for and goals of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics, the rest of this study discusses the factors that affect the methods and results of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics.

Factors that Affect the Methods and Results/Findings of Biblical Exegesis and Hermeneutics

There are factors that are capable of affecting both the methods which an exegete would employ and the results/conclusions drawn in his or her exegesis and hermeneutics. Being aware of the pluralistic and complex nature of these factors, this paper presents only four of such factors¹ that the author considers as having enormous impact on the exegete. These include (1) the background of the exegete, (2) the worldview of the exegete, (3) individual biases and idiosyncrasies of the exegete, (4) and the life experiences of the exegete. A general discussion of each factor is followed by examples of how each factor can affect the interpretation of issues and passages in the Bible.

¹Examples of others include (1) denominational dogmas, doctrines, and fundamental beliefs; (2) reactions to current theological trends; (3) general knowledge base of exegete; (4) academic and professional training and competence of exegete.

Background of the Exegete

The general background of an exegete is capable of influencing the methods as well as results or conclusions of his or her exegesis and hermeneutics. In view of the general nature of backgrounds that surround an individual, this section demonstrates the possible influence of background on one's exegesis through the following major components: geo-political, socio-economic and cultural background.

The geo-political, socio-economic and cultural background of an exegete may affect the findings, conclusions, and interpretation of an exegete on a given issue or passage in Scripture. For instance, there is a wide gap between the cultural and geo-political milieu in Africa and the West. Consequently, exegetes from these diverse backgrounds may interpret some issues in the Bible differently, especially if they depend on their geo-political, socio-economic and cultural milieu to understand and interpret such issues and passages.¹ This of course is bound to yield divergent interpretations and conclusions on the same subject matter. A few examples are discussed below.

First, the meaning and significance of *agora* in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard in Matt 20:1-16 provides a classical example. Exegetes of Western and African backgrounds do not agree on the nature and significance of *agora* in the parable in view. Because of the modern industrialized, high-tech, and cyber-driven nature of the Western societies, transactions in almost every aspect of

¹It should be borne in mind that on the average, Africans share more similar backgrounds with the Bible lands, especially in OT times, than the Westerners. However, it is ironical that most African exegetes heavily rely on sources that are written from purely Western perspectives to interpret and understand the Bible.

human endeavour (from banking, exchange of information and ideas, to employment) is almost exclusively done digitally. This makes it difficult for some exegetes of Western background to understand and appreciate the NT *agora* concept expressed in the parable in view. Nevertheless, the NT concept of *agora* is congruent with the African concept of the “centre of civic life” such as the village square, town hall, or market square, where exchange of different sorts take place. This perhaps explains why William Edward Raffety, from a Western perspective, argues that *agora* in Matt 20:1-16 refers to “a place for loafers, a sort of ancient, *irresponsible* labor bureau where the out-of-work idler waited the coming of an employer with whom he might bargain for his services, usually by the day.”¹ However, Akpa, being aware of the proximity between the Greco-Roman *agora* of the first century AD and the present-day African societies, argues that “the NT context of *agora* presents it as a place where the *viable* workforce gathered on daily basis to be hired by those who needed their services. It is not a place for people who are either out of job or idle due to unwillingness to work. . . . In essence, therefore, the *agora* in the parable in view is a place where labourers with *genuine* intention and desire to be hired gather to wait for employers.”² Notice the shift in the description of the labourers in the *agora*, from “irresponsible” to “viable” and “genuine” in the works of the two exegetes cited above.

¹William Edward Raffety, “Market; Marketplace,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, fully rev. and illustrated ed. (1988), 3:260. Emphasis on “irresponsible” is mine.

²Michael Onyedikachi Akpa, “From the Agora to the Vineyard: A Rereading of Matthew 20:1-16 in the African Context,” *African Journal of Biblical Studies* 27, no. 1 (2009): 46. Emphases on “viable” and “genuine” are mine.

The disparity in the understanding of *agora* might also be the result of the disparity in interpreting the Greek word *argos* (Matt 20:3,6,7). If one interprets *argos* to mean “idle” as was done by Raffety, one tends to see *agorá* as the place for idle people. But if one interprets *argos* as “without work”, “not hired”, hence “unemployed” as the Greek text of the passage indicates, one would understand *agora* as the place for the “unemployed” who are willing to work.

Second, an exegete from a capitalist economic background will have severe problem understanding why the Land Owner in the parable in Matt 20:1-16 paid the same amount for people who worked for different number of hours (Matt 20:8-15). Such capitalist-oriented concerns have been raised by some Western authors.¹ However, exegetes from such economic background where labourers live one day at a time do not find it strange that the Land Owner pays each set of workers what he agreed with them, without prejudice to what he agreed with other groups or individuals as is presented in the parable. Afterall, the main thrust of the parable in Matt 20:1-16, which is a response to the dialogue in Matt 19:16-30, is that “eternal life exclusively belongs to God and He reserves the right to give it to whomever He wishes”,² based on obedience.

¹See, for example, Mark A. Copelan, “‘The Parables of Jesus’: The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16),” available at http://executableoutlines.com/pa/pa_12.htm; par. 11; Anne Robertson, “Laborers in the Vineyard,” available at <http://www.annerobertson.com/2005/04/laborers-in-vineyard.html>; par. 1; Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, The International Critical Commentary, 3d ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1972), 214-215.

²Akpa, “From the *Agora* to the Vineyard,” 49.

Worldview of the Exegete

The worldview of an exegete could, to a great extent, affect the process and proceed of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics. The impact of worldview on the process and result of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics could have a corporate or an individual dimension.

The dialogue between the Sadducees and Jesus concerning marriage “on the resurrection” (Matt 22:23-33) provides a classic example for the corporate dimension of the impact of worldview on biblical exegesis and hermeneutics. The general worldview of the Sadducees is expressed in their

- (a) disbelief in resurrection (Matt 22:23) and by extension, immortality;
- (b) denial of the existence of spirits and angels;¹
- (c) repudiation of the tradition of the elders² based on the Pentateuch and
- (d) contradiction of the Pharisees on almost every issue.³

As a result of their denial of the resurrection of the dead, the Sadducees crafted a case study based on the serial marriage between one woman and seven brothers, who all died after marrying the woman who also died after the seventh brother (Matt 22:23-28). Their question on who among the seven dead brothers would be the husband of the deceased woman on the

¹Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 144.

²Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), 44; Cohen 147, 149; Steve Mason, “Sadducees,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1150.

³Cohen, 155.

resurrection (Matt 22:28) portrays the aim of the Sadducees; namely, to annul the veracity of the teaching on and belief in the resurrection of the dead through the absurdity of their case study as well as antagonise Jesus by putting Him against Moses (Matt 22:24). It has been argued that the marriage case study in view is both legendary in character¹ and hypothetical in nature,² since the Sadducees needed only two, not seven brothers to establish the complexity of their case.³

Jesus' response to the case study (Matt 22:29-32) faulted the exegetical and hermeneutical standpoint of the Sadducees on two counts: (1) their poor knowledge of Scripture and (2) their denial of the power of God. Both points are very crucial in understanding the issues surrounding marriage and the resurrection of the dead. The OT Scriptures affirm the resurrection of the dead (see, for example, 1 Kgs 17:10-24; 2 Kgs 13:21; Dan 12:2). God also reserves the power to continue or discontinue marital relationships on the resurrection. Hence, Akpa's position on the subject is persuasive:

Subscribing to any absolute view on marriage after the resurrection could be dangerous because it may also lead one to deny the power of God who may choose to permit marriage to continue in the new earth or abolish it. There is safety in doing one's best

¹Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33B, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Baker (Dallas, TX: Word, 1995), 640.

²W. J. Moulder, "Sadducees," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, completely rev. and reset ed. (1988), 4:280.

³Craig I. Bloomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 22:333; Hagner, 641.

to live in peace and harmony with one's spouse and family so as to enjoy the best that this battered life can bring. Then, every other issue should be left in the hands of an all-powerful and all-knowing God to decide. Therefore, Christian couples and families are encouraged to live together in love, peace, and harmony to such an extent that they will find joy living together in the new earth, should God ordain it so.¹

On the individual level, a person's worldview is capable of affecting one's interpretive standpoint on biblical issues. To illustrate this, consider the interpretive possibilities that could arise from the expression, "GODISNOWHERE" if two interpreters of different persuasions were asked to independently read it. An atheist, who does not believe in God, would read the expression as "GOD IS NOWHERE", in harmony with his view that there is no God. On the contrary, one who believes in God would read the same expression as "GOD IS NOW HERE", affirming both the existence of God and His immanence (nearness to His creatures).

Biases and Idiosyncrasies of the Exegete

Personal and corporate biases as well as idiosyncrasies could affect the process and results of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics. This becomes pertinent if such biases and idiosyncrasies are expressed by prominent persons or opinion leaders who most people look up to and consequently do not deem it necessary to scrutinise their views and opinions. An

¹Michael Onyedikachi Akpa, "Marriage or Resurrection: An Exegetical Study of Matt 22:23-33," *Insight: Journal of Religious Studies* 2, nos. 1 & 2 (2005): 25.

example emerges in relation to the negative views on Nimrod based on his Hamitic roots in Gen 10:6-12.

On the personal dimension, Philo of Alexandria has been described as the foremost Jewish writer who gave negative attributes to Nimrod by taking advantage of Nimrod's Hamitic roots. Philo identified Nimrod as an Ethiopian, the black one, who has no participation in the light. Insisting that Ham stands for evil and that all descendants of Ham, including Nimrod are spiritually unproductive, Philo gave such negative representation of Nimrod that is nowhere found in the biblical text.¹ On a corporate dimension, Machinist points out that there seems to be a corporate bias against Nimrod in post-biblical sources in that most of these sources, especially Jewish, singled out Nimrod "as the greatest sinner since the Flood."² However, a more neutral view, arguing from linguistic and thematic considerations from the Bible, contends:

The Bible does not portray Nimrod negatively. Further, it was the postbiblical sources, based mostly on speculative traditions, that portrayed Nimrod with the negativity that has persisted up to the present. Therefore, it is unsafe to conclude, based on nonbiblical sources, that Nimrod's activities were hostile and directed against God or that he built the Tower of Babel.³

¹Michael O. Akpa, "Did Nimrod Build the Tower of Babel?" *Asia Adventist Seminary Studies* 7 (2004): 109.

²Peter Machinist, "Nimrod," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 4:1117.

³Akpa, "Nimrod," 112.

It is therefore obvious that personal and corporate biases and idiosyncrasies of exegetes could, if unguarded, affect the process and result of interpreting biblical passages.

Life Experiences of the Exegete

This is the most subtle factor that is not usually very easy to detect. Since the exegete does not find it convenient to express the impact of personal experiences on the interpretation of biblical passages, the readers of the works of such an exegete usually find it difficult to sift through what is neutral and what is coloured by personal experiences. Ultimately, the personal experiences of exegetes, if not overcome, form the bedrock on which their interpretive standpoints on Scriptures are established on some sensitive issues.

A classical example in the OT is found in the various interpretations given to the Songs of Solomon. The Song of Solomon has been given various interpretations in the course of Christian history. These varied interpretations do not necessarily grow from a thorough exegesis of the book. Rather, various interpreters have reacted to the book based on their life experiences as well as the prevalent values in their age, especially in relation to marriage, family relationship, love, and sex. Consequently, one thing that has survived in relation to the interpretation of the book is that it has not received a literal interpretation. Instead, it is often given figurative, symbolic, and allegorical interpretation. The denial of a literal interpretation of the Songs of Solomon in favour of a symbolic or allegorical one is not surprising, bearing in mind that most of the leading interpretations of the book along history came mainly from Jews and monastic ascetics

who have and express a low view on women and marital relationship.

The monastic era spurned relationship between men and women and extolled celibacy, hence the seclusion of both sexes into separate monasteries and convents. It is therefore not surprising if such a highly romantic language found in the Song of Songs may have irritated the celibate and ascetic monks and nuns who disdained love and sex between the opposite sexes to the point that they chose to spiritualise the book in order to find meaning in it.

This approach has called the book to question in the minds of many Christian readers of today. It is therefore easy to understand why many preachers today relegate the book to the background in their preaching, only occasionally lifting verses from it during wedding ceremonies, instead of extolling the virtues and values of genuine love that are espoused in the book to the benefit of their Christian audience.

Paul, in Ephesians 5:22-30, described the relationship between the wife and her husband by comparing it with the relationship between Christ and the Church. This comparison affirms the efficacy of both relationships, without sacrificing any or placing one above the other as was done by the monastic interpretation of Song of Solomon. It must be reiterated that in Ephesians 5, Paul acknowledged that there are two separate relationships: (1) between a wife and her husband, and (2) between Christ and the Church. Viewed this way, it becomes difficult to establish such dual application of Solomon's Song of Songs.

In addition, the OT and NT contain clear illustrations of the tender union between God and His people through the relationship of a husband to his bride (Ezek 16:1-22; Isa 54:4-5; Jer 3:14; 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 21:2). In these passages, the prophets make it emphatically clear that God is the Speaker,

in which case the figures He uses are not to be accorded a literal interpretation. Moreover, if the Song of Songs is an allegory, a symbolic representation, a typology, or a parable, and does not literally celebrate human love through Solomon and his Shulamite country girl, the interpreter of the book is faced with several difficulties.

1. The highly sexual and erotic language used in presenting the book will be nothing but a poetic overkill: using such a heavy concrete poetic language to describe an abstract relationship between God and humans.
2. A sincere exegete would not deny the presence of a full-blown sexual union (perhaps ending in coitus) in the story. How does an interpreter rationalise this away in a symbolic interpretation?
3. A symbolic and allegoric interpreter of the Songs will have great difficulties in explaining the meaning of:
 - (a) such sexually sensitive body parts mentioned in the book, for example, breasts (7:3, 7; 4:5-6), navel (7:2), thighs (7:1), eyes (4:1), lips (4:3, 11), hair (4:1), tongue (4:11) and roof of the mouth (palate), implying deep kissing (7:9);
 - (b) such overtly human sexual behaviour exhibited in the book, for example, preparation for sexual activities such as removing one's dress and remaining naked (5:3a) and washing one's feet and not wanting to defile them (5:3b), extreme sexual arousal (5:4-5), kissing (4:11; 7:9), fondling and caressing (2:6), squeezing the breasts (7:7-8).

An example in the NT concerns the interpretation of Paul's attitude to marriage in 1 Cor 7. John Drane argues that Paul's marital experiences may have influenced his somewhat low view on marriage in 1 Cor 7. Drane believes that Paul was divorced, although the most tenable issue is that Paul was not married at the time he wrote the epistle.¹

Others argue that based on Paul's membership of the Sanhedrin, a Jewish council that required marriage prerequisite to membership, there "seems to be little doubt, therefore, that sometime prior to the writing of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul had been married."² Similarly, someone who has bitter marital experiences might quickly interpret Matt 22:23-33 as teaching that there would be no marriage in the new order of life after resurrection.

Conclusions

From the discussion so far in this paper, several conclusions are drawn. First, exegesis and hermeneutics, being two sides of a coin, are very essential tools for bringing out the meaning of Bible passages from the point of view of the original author and audience and making the passages speak to the life and experiences of the modern person. Second, exegesis and exegesis are needed today because of the various gaps that exist between the author and original audience on one hand and the modern reader on the other hand.

They are also needed because the Bible is not written from a monotonous dimension. The variety of authors,

¹John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament* (Oxford, England: Lion Publishing, 1999), 327.

²Francis D. Nichol, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1978), 7:707.

language, literary styles and devices, genres, and issues presented in the Bible call for a careful, painstaking exegesis and hermeneutics to enable the modern reader rightly divide the word of truth. Third, biblical exegetes hardly approach Bible texts from a blank slate perspective.

They consciously, subconsciously, or even unconsciously bring much of themselves into their interpretation of Scripture. Consequently, there are several factors that could affect the methods and results of doing biblical exegesis and hermeneutics.

Those presented in this paper include (1) the background of the exegete, (2) the worldview of the exegete, (3) individual biases and idiosyncrasies of the exegete, (4) and the life experiences of the exegete. Fourth, it is as the biblical exegetes make conscious efforts to eliminate or minimize these factors that they are able to do sound, faithful, and reliable exegesis and hermeneutics of the Bible, moderated by the opinions of other God-fearing and Bible-believing exegetes. Fifth, biblical exegetes should resist the temptation to use critical methods in doing biblical exegesis and hermeneutics.

They should accept the Bible as the revealed word of God and treat it as such, with child-like faith, leaving room for God to mediate His word in their lives and effect genuine conversion which they in turn would seek to mediate to others, bearing in mind that biblical exegesis and hermeneutics go beyond mere scholarship to encompass mission for human salvation through biblical scholarship. Sixth and finally, biblical exegetes should rely on the all-sufficient guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

Recognising that He was God's active Agent of inspiring the Bible writer would make it easier for one to accept that He still leads people to a perfect understanding of the Bible today. Else, the exegetes fall into the temptation of twisting

passages of Scripture to their own damnation and the damnation of those under their tutelage and influence.