METHODS, STEPS, AND TOOLS[1]
IN INTERPRETATION

KENNETH D. MULZAC, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Old Testament
AIIAS Theological Seminary

Introduction

Generally, oral communication takes place in familiar situations with familiar people. We are able to assess the context and intention of the speaker as we analyze and comprehend his/her message. A similar, though not identical, situation occurs when we read written documents. Since the writer is usually absent, the words themselves assume a greater importance than in a situation of oral communication. This introduces some degree of difficulty in the interpretation which may be compounded due to two factors: the extent to which the sender (author/editor) and the receiver (reader) share a common world of discourse and experience, and the extent to which the communication and the form in which it occurs involved specialized content and forms of expression.

In biblical studies, other complexities may compound this difficulty in interpretation. These include:

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.

---

[1]The section on tools has been deleted from this paper and will be published in a later issue of the journal.

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. More than five thousand different Greek manuscripts or fragments of the NT are known, including lectionaries. Among these there is a large number of variant readings.

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.

Given this situation, there is need for a proper method of interpretation. The method which best satisfies this need is exegesis.

Definition

Exegesis is a normal activity in which we all engage on a daily basis. Whenever we hear or read something and seek to understand what has been said, we are engaging in exegesis. The term itself is derived from the Greek word *exegeomai*, which basically means "to bring out." When applied to texts, it denotes the "bringing out" of the meaning. The noun, therefore, refers to "explanation" or "interpretation." Indeed, "The term *exegesis* (used often by biblical scholars but seldom by specialists in other fields) is a fancy way of referring to interpretation."[2]

In this adventure, where "we hear the voice of the living God,"[3] we need to note two factors. Positively, the modern biblical exegete has been preceded by centuries of study and interpretations, which he/she can explore for insight and information. Negatively, the Bible has been surrounded by a wide variety of traditions and traditional interpretations. 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. To do this is to engage in *eisegesis*, a "reading into," rather than exegesis, a "reading out of."[4]

In order to do sound exegesis it is necessary to interrogate the text. The questions formulated must arise as the text is read. The interpreter has to ask questions and listen to the text for answers. This action is often referred to as

[2]Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Mosés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Manila: OMF Literature, 1998), 19.

[3]Craig 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.

[4]This leads us to pay extraordinary attention to our presuppositions when we come to explore the meaning of the text. For a discussion of this issue in the wider hermeneutical sphere, see Kaiser and Silva, 28-31, where the major tenets in the development of contemporary hermeneutical theory are presented.

"criticism." It is a technical term, derived from the Greek word *krinein* ("to judge," "to discern," "to discriminate"), which points to certain principles and techniques that are useful in helping the interpreter make discerning judgments and decisions when studying the biblical text. It is not a negative or destructive term.

A basic tenet here is that the Bible is not merely a historical document that informs us about the life, culture, and religious tenets of ancient peoples. It is a living document that is infused with the power of the living God. Hence, "Biblical exegesis—establishing the original meaning of the text—and hermeneutics—proposing a contemporary meaning of that text—are together a *theological* work."[5]

Steps in the Exegetical Process

It is necessary to point out that these steps are not to be attempted in a linear fashion, that is, completing one before moving to the next. Rather, the exegete must understand that there is necessarily some overlap among these steps and that he or she must revisit and revise each step as discoveries are made and information comes to bear on the passage. This is the spiral approach.[6]

Textual Analysis

The text, which constitutes the only actual data we have, must be considered in its "finished state."[7] Therefore, a basic knowledge and understanding of the vocabulary of the text along with its possible original wording are implied here. Textual criticism is engaged when alternative wordings or variant readings of the

[5]Charles 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.

[6]Broyles, 20. John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), 132, say that "the various exegetical procedures are not related to one another in any strict architectonic fashion. That is, no mechanical system of steps or stages in the exegetical process can be set up and rigidly followed. One cannot, let us say, first do the textual-critical analysis, and then proceed to a second step and so on. Frequently, the interests and issues of the various criticisms are interrelated."

[7]James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 1-18, proposed "rhetorical criticism" as a supplement to "form criticism" (though in practice he basically abandoned the latter). Form critics probe behind the present text in an attempt to uncover its earlier or preliterary (oral) stages of development. Muilenburg rejected this. He treated the text as a unity rather than putting emphasis on the process by which it developed, the stages of that development, and the variety of social settings in which it came into being.

same text exist. These textual differences are usually supplied in the critical apparatus of the Hebrew Bible and Greek NT. The exegete wants to be relatively certain of the original wording of the text, so he or she will consult the apparatus.

The task of textual criticism is threefold: (1) to determine how a text is transmitted and came to exist in variant forms, (2) to find the original wording (if possible), and (3) to determine the best form and wording of that text.[8] To do this, the interpreter should pay attention to the following:

1. Read the text repeatedly in the original language (where possible). This helps the exegete to "feel" the rhythm of the text. Remember that exegesis is not only a science but an art.

2. Consult the critical apparatus, noting the variants and examining the solutions proposed.

3. Compare the text in various versions, both ancient and modern. For example, compare the MT with the LXX, NIV, NASB, and TEV (to name a few). These factors will help one to leave one's own notions and presuppositions behind (though not completely) as one reads with "fresh eyes" and hears the text anew.[9]

4. Provide a translation. Any translation into a modern language must match the original in terms of meaning. Be sure to understand that "words don't have a single meaning, but rather a range of meaning(s). . . . Translation therefore always involves selection."[10] In order to reach this ideal, use seasoned lexicons.[11]

A key rule to remember in translation is, Keep it simple. It is not necessary to use so-called "big words" in the receptor language. Also, strive to rid the translation of ambiguous words. But while striving for simplicity, do not neglect clarity and precision in meaning.

It is necessary to continuously revise the translation, especially in the study of key words (see below). Obviously, a finished translation must be provided. The exegete should ensure that the words fit the specific context of the passage at hand. The final edition probably will not come until one is almost finished with the exegesis of the passage, because as new findings which affect the meaning of the text are uncovered, they must be expressed in the translation.

[8]Hayes and Holladay, 38.

[9]For an interesting discussion on this, see R. Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" in *New Testament and Mythology and other Basic Writings: Rudolph Bultmann*, ed. S. M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984; London: SCM, 1985), 145-53.

[10]Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Primer for Students and Pastors*, 2d ed., rev. and enlarged (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 23.

[11]A few good examples include, William Gesenius, ed., *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1979); William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1971); Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2d ed., rev. and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (1979).

A special note about poetry is appropriate here, since poetry is not presented as straightforwardly as prose. As Douglas Stuart counsels correctly, we must "arrange the lines of poetry according to parallelism and rhythm (meter). The process of arrangement and the arrangement itself are both referred to as stichometry. The modern English translations usually arrange poetry stichometrically. Consult them as well."[12]

Linguistic Analysis

As the name suggests, linguistic analysis deals with the mechanics of the language. The interest here is not only the meaning of individual words but also the arrangement of these words in phrases and sentences that "form meaningful sense units."[13] Several important elements must be considered.

1. Grammar. Craig C. Broyles comments with clarity here. "Be clear on the grammatical construction of sentences, noting connectives, main and subordinate clauses, subjects (divine, human), objects, verbs (declarative, imperative, etc.), and modifiers (adjectives and adverbs)."[14]

2. Syntax. Pay close attention to the sentence structure, examining the arrangement of words, and showing their mutual relationship in a sentence. In short, examine the formal properties of language.

3. Word studies. These form an intricate part of linguistics. A word study may be defined as the systematic analysis of the meaning(s) of one particular word as it is used within the particular context of the passage at hand and in the Bible at large. The goal is to arrive at the specific meaning in a particular biblical text. We should keep in the forefront of our minds that the meaning of the word depends ultimately on the context in which it is used.

The methodology for this study varies, depending on the frequency of the word. For example, if the word is used infrequently or if it is a *hapax legomenon*, that is, occurring only once in the OT or NT, then this affects how one will explore the word. To gain an understanding, one must obtain information from the Hebrew or Greek word itself and its translations.

Consider the following methodology:

(a) Meaning. Use a Hebrew or Greek lexicon (dictionary) to find the basic and secondary meaning(s) of the word. A record should be made with one or two references for each meaning.

(b) Semantic range. Note the full range of meaning, any semantic overlap with other words, as well as synonyms and antonyms.

[12]Stuart, 25.
[13]Hayes and Holladay, 59.
[14]Broyles, 21.

(c) Frequency. Use a concordance and record the total frequency of the word, its distribution in a block of writing from that book, in the book itself, in a similar genre, and in that Testament. Make a record.

(d) Syntactical relationship. Note the common subjects, objects, and kinds of action associated with the word, especially if it is a verb.

(e) Cognates. These are words, in another language, with which the Hebrew or Greek word is usually associated. Indicate the frequency of the respective associations as well as their meaning.

(f) Examine both the theological and non-theological usage and function of the word.

(g) Examine how the word is used in the text at hand, and decide on the best meaning in that context.

Make proper use of Bible dictionaries and wordbooks that specialize in the systematic and comprehensive study of these words. These are guides, and the interpreter does not need to become dependent on them.[15]

4. Incorporate these findings into the translation. This will help to better understand the overall tenor and meaning of the passage.

Literary Analysis

In the third step, literary analysis, one pays attention to the features of the text as literature. Of course, the text is not to be seen as an ordinary literary composition but, rather, as sacred. In fact, this enhances the seriousness with which we approach the text, as well as the deep respect and humility we bring to the exegetical task. Here we understand that "the Bible must be read *literarily* before it can be read *literally*."[16]

Several literary features must be given due attention:

1. Delimitation. The passage should be a self-contained unit or a pericope. Do not depend on the chapter and verse divisions (of modern versions), which were certainly not part of the original text and are sometimes totally wrong.

In the delimitation process, look for clues which arise from the text itself. Broyles is instructive:

---

[15]Two excellent examples for OT studies are, R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1980); and G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 10 vols., trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977-). For NT studies the following are noteworthy: Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975-78); and Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76).

[16]Broyles, 28 (emphasis his).

Opening and closing formulas may alert us to a passage's limits . . . . Changes in genre (e.g., from narrative to law), subject/content, speaker/audience, or situational context may indicate a transition to a new passage. We should also observe grammatical changes in person (e.g., from second-person or direct address, "you," to third-person reference, "he") or tense (e.g., from present to past), and changes in tone/mood.[17]

A rather common delimiting factor is the *inclusio*, where what is said in the beginning of the passage is repeated at the end. Sometimes the exact or nearly exact same terms are used. For example, Ps 150:1 exclaims, "Praise the Lord!" Verse 6 ends with the same exclamation.

The Messenger Formula, "Thus says the Lord," is also common. For example, Jer 1:4 declares, "The word of the Lord came unto me . . . ," and 1:11 uses the same expression, indicating that vv. 4-10 comprise a complete pericope, while another begins with v. 11.

2. Genre. Technically, this refers to "a shared pattern of communication, usually shaped in a particular social context, that signals expectations of how a text/speech is to be understood and used."[18] In laymen's terms, genre denotes a particular type of literature. Indeed, there are all kinds of literature in the Bible: story or narrative, law, history, genealogy, poetry, prophecy, song, gospel, parable, letter, and so forth. In order to read the text intelligently and interpret judiciously, the exegete must be aware of the characteristics of the particular genre at hand. For example, when reading apocalyptic literature (e.g., Daniel and Revelation), one must note the use of certain literary motifs ("a shared pattern of communication") like numbers, symbols, striking contrasts, dreams and visions, cosmic sweep, and an eschatological emphasis. The social setting of crises and conflicts for both the speaker or writer and his audience must be understood. A defined purpose, showing that the situation of the suffering community is in God's care, must be grasped.[19]

3. Theme. This points to the main idea or motif that dominates the pericope. It is the main artery of the river into which tributaries flow. Broyles claims that "a thematic statement serves as a kind of road map for the passage."[20] As the passage is read and re-read the exegete should ask, What is the main idea this passage is speaking about? What does it concentrate on? What is the perspective of the passage? What words, ideas, and events in the passage provide hints to this idea?

[17]Ibid., 23.

[18]Ibid., 32.

[19]See Kenneth A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation: Hermeneutical Guidelines with Brief Introduction to Literary Analysis*, 2d ed. (Naples, FL: Ann Arbor, 1979), 17-23.

[20]Broyles, 30.

Where do we see those hints—in the beginning, middle, or end of the passage? Who are the main characters? What are they doing?

4. Structure. The structure delineates the constituent parts of the passage as a whole. The exegete investigates how certain poetic devices serve as key concepts which brighten the specific meaning of the text. The makeup of the particular text or passage under consideration is very important to its critical understanding. One needs to search for the building blocks which the author used to construct the text. Factors such as chiasmus, parallelism, repetition, and the like should be evaluated.[21] The responsibility of the exegete is to search out "the linguistic structure of the text *as it presently lies before him*."[22] To put it another way, he or she must "explore [the] structural features of individual texts."[23]

When dealing with structure, the following steps should be considered:

(a)   Outline the passage. Follow the major units of the pericope. This outline should be a natural outgrowth of the text. It should not be forced. Whenever a new topic, issue, or concept comes into view, the exegete should note this.

(b)   Follow patterns. Meaningful patterns may be seen through key features such as key words, parallelisms, development of ideas, resumption of thought, and so forth. Two key issues in identifying patterns are (i) repetitions of concepts, words, roots, and so forth; and (ii) progression of the same or similar thought, issue, or idea.

(c)   Note subpatterns. After looking for the major sections, examine the smaller units and see how these fit together.

(d)   Identify the central theme. This is the major motif around which the passage is built. It is like the main artery of a river.

(e)   Identify sub-themes. These are like the tributaries that flow into the main artery of the river.

The exegete constantly interrogates the text and listens for its answers. Inquiries such as the following should be made: How is the central thought developed from verse to verse? What is the plot of this passage?[24] What are the

[21]By paying attention to the artistic features of the text, emphasis is placed on the structure of the pericope, looking for literary devices such as repetitions, key words, strophes (in poetic literature), etc., which signal the structural integrity of the passage.

[22]Roy F. Melugin, "Muilenburg, Form Criticism and Theological Exegesis," in *Encounter with the Text: Form and History in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Martin J. Buss (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1979), 93. (Emphasis his).

[23]Ibid.

[24]The plot generally has three parts: (1) the *situation*, which describes the plight and condition of the character; (2) the *complication*, which makes the situation worse, either by some internal or external conflict; and (3) the *resolution*, generally reached through someone or something external to the main character. See David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford Bible Series, ed. P. R. Ackroyd and G. N. Stanton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 102. This plot is often found in the narratives which detail the miracles of Jesus.

constituent points? What are the sub-points? Are there transitions from one part to another? What are these transitions—change in character, speaker, pronoun, or verb types? What kind of verbal expressions indicate the parts—questions, declarations, imperatives, and so forth?

5. Poetic features. This refers not to poetry *per se* but to the figures of speech in the passage. Such poetic qualities add richness, depth, and literary quality, as well as emotional impact, to the passage. They perk up the interest of the reader. Ask, What role do they play? Are they unique to this passage? Where else are they found? Broyles lists the more common figures of speech:[25]

> 1. *Simile:* an explicit comparison (x is like y: "Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel," Exod. 24:17)
> 2. *Metaphor:* an implicit comparison ($x = y$; "The Lord is my shepherd," Ps. 23:1)
> 3. *Synecdoche:* stating a part but referring to the whole ($x \rightarrow X$; "May the LORD cut off all flattering lips [i.e., wicked people]," Ps. 12:3) or vice versa ($X \rightarrow x$)
> 4. *Metonymy:* referring to something by naming an associated item ("The LORD has established his *throne* [i.e., royal rule] in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all" Ps. 103:19)
> 5. *Personification:* attributing human qualities to what is not human (e.g., Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly in Proverbs 8-9)
> 6. *Anthropomorphism:* attributing human qualities to God (e.g., "the arm of the Lord," Isa. 51:9)
> 7. *Hyperbole:* overstatement ("every night I flood my bed with tears," Ps. 6:6)
> 8. *Irony:* saying one thing but intending the opposite, usually with sarcasm ("Come to Bethel—and transgress," Amos 4:4).

6. Function and placement. This examines the location of the passage. One should investigate how it fits within the immediate and larger contexts. Stuart questions insightfully,

> Is your passage part of a story or a literary grouping that has a discernible beginning, middle, and end? Does it fill in, add on, introduce, bring to completion, or counterbalance the portion or book of which it is a part? What does it add to the overall picture? What does the overall picture add to it?

> Just how does it fit within the section, book, division, Testament, Bible—in that order? Is it one of many similar texts in the same book, or perhaps in the OT as a whole? In what sense is it unique?[26]

[25]Broyles, 37.
[26]Stuart, 28-29.

Historical Analysis

Biblical revelation is set in the flesh of human history. The biblical data is comprised not only of statements concerning declarations and instructions but also of real historical people and events. Hence, we must seek to understand the "history *in* the text."[27] This tells us what the text narrates about history—the people, places, events, social situation, and dates—which inform us about the conditions (political, social, and religious) of the period which the text talks about. Scholars also refer to the "history *of* the text," that is, "the situation out of which the text arose—the situation of the author and the audience."[28] This is often called the life situation or *Sitz im Leben*.[29] For example, in predicting the destruction of Israel, the prophet Amos uses the funeral dirge (characterized by the 3+3 meter), which was derived from the life situation of funerals. Therefore, the exegete inquires about funerary dirges: How, when, where, why, and in what circumstances did they come into being?[30]

In order to understand the historical context we need to pay attention to several factors:

1. Background and foreground of the passage. This calls for an investigation of the people or characters mentioned in the pericope itself. We need to understand their identity, behaviors, and background, even the meaning of their names. The event(s) in the passage also need(s) attention. We should examine the factors that led up to that point as recorded in the text. We should also know the major occurrences that gave rise to the specific situation, as well as what was happening both on the national and international scene. Know the major players (kings, warriors, judges, leaders) on the world stage at that time. Examine all passages that may share a parallel or similar historical background in the Bible and see how these may throw light on the text at hand.

In this particular, Stuart asks a series of questions that are helpful to the exegete:

[27]Hayes and Holladay, 45.

[28]Ibid., 48-49.

[29]Some writers make a sharp distinction between these two, placing the latter strictly in literary analysis. But as Hayes and Holladay, 49, note, "In some instances, the situation described in the text and the situation out of which the text arose may reflect the same historical setting."

[30]Amos 5:18-20 uses the motif of the "Day of the Lord." Scholarship offers various positions about the life situation that gave shape to this form. G. von Rad, "The Origin of the Concept of the Day of Yahweh," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 4 (1959): 97-108, claims a provenance in Holy War. J. Gray, "The Day of Yahweh," *Svensk exegetisk arsbok* 39 (1974): 5-37, suggests that it was conceptualized in Israel's cult, when Yahweh as King enthroned Himself and wrought salvation for His people. Others place its origin in the theophany. See M. Weiss, "The Origin of the 'Day of the Lord'—Reconsidered," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 37 (1966): 40.

Did major trends or developments in Israel or the rest of the ancient world have any bearing on the passage or any part of its content? . . . What comes next? What does the passage lead to? What that is significant ultimately happens to the people, places, things, and concepts of the passage? Does the passage contain information that is essential to understanding something else that occurs or is said later? Is the passage at the start of any new developments? Where does the passage fit in the general scope of OT history? Are there any implications that follow from its placement?[31]

2. Historical situation. This refers to the particular way in which the author of the composition understood history, that is, his philosophy of history. This is illustrated in the historical bent of the books of Samuel-Kings and Chronicles. They report the same history but from two different foci. Broyles explains:[32]

The Books of Samuel-Kings concluded in the exilic period and address the issue of why Yahweh sent his people into exile. The Books of Chronicles concluded with Cyrus's decree allowing the Jews to return to their homeland and to restore the temple, and thus address the issue of restoring the people of God. As a result, the selectivity of each historian differs widely. Samuel-Kings focuses on human rebellion and divine judgment, and Chronicles focuses on human obedience, especially regarding worship at the temple, and divine blessing (i.e., historical patterns that foster restoration).

3. Geography. The Bible is a "land-based" book, that is, its events took place on earth. It is not an extraterrestrial book. Hence, the exegete must pay attention to things such as location, distances between points, and so forth. It is advisable to know where events took place: buildings, regions, cities, villages, tribal territories, and so forth. Does the passage refer to the northern or southern tribes? Is there a particular geographical perspective to the passage?

Attention must also be given to factors such as topography, climate, economy, and so forth, to see how they cast light on the text.

4. Archaeology. This is the attempt to reconstruct human history by using artifacts which have been unearthed. Artifacts include written documents such as cuneiform tablets and stelae as well as a wide range of other material evidence: from jars and sherds to figurines; from houses and hovels to temples and monuments; from single interments to vast graveyards. The science of archeology has grown tremendously in the last several decades. Hence, any archeological data that may illuminate the passage at hand should be investigated.

5. Sociology. In this particular aspect of the life setting we inquire as to the details in Israel's social life which occasioned the text. For example, when you

---

[31]Stuart, 26-27.
[32]Broyles, 43.

study Amos, you must grasp the separation between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in that society, and the resultant evils and excesses, to understand why the prophet condemns the rich. Again, Stuart's questions are relevant: "What social and civil institutions bear upon the passage? How do they illumine the passage?"[33]

6. Culture. The Bible was not written in a vacuum. The people, events, languages, and customs were set in a particular place and time and were influenced or affected by the cultural norms and mores of society. Broyles's claim is true that the "histories of the ancestors, of the Hebrew people, and of the Israelite nation and its demise are inextricably influenced by ANE [Ancient Near Eastern] cultures and history."[34] Further, his advice is well taken that "for us at great chronological and cultural distance from ancient Israel, we must use every resource available."[35] As we compare the Bible with ANE literature, it is not to see if the Bible borrowed from these sources "but to gain insight into the world to which God spoke."[36] By examining the extrabiblical material and comparing it with the biblical data, the exegete may gain valuable background information. For example, a comparison of the Genesis creation stories and those from ANE literature can inform us about their similarities and differences and help us to understand the nature and context of the biblical text in a much better way than before.[37]

Concerning culture, several questions may be asked: "What parallels occur in other literature? How close are the parallels? Are they literary, traditional, or cultural?"[38] Stuart adds, "Is the passage directly relevant only to an ancient Israelite (i.e., culturally 'bound') or is it useful and meaningful today? . . . Are the events or concepts uniquely Israelite, or could they have occurred or been expressed elsewhere?"[39]

7. Date. Attempt to date the passage. Admittedly, this is easier for historical narratives, where events are often pinpointed, than for poetic pieces. In any event, establishing the approximate time when an event occurred, or when a prophecy was delivered, or when a poem was composed, may be helpful in throwing light on the text.

[33]Stuart, 27.

[34]Broyles, 49. He adds, "By comparison and contrast with these ancient literatures we also gain an appreciation for the uniqueness of the Old Testament revelation."

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

[37]For a succinct discussion of the polemical nature of the Genesis creation account in contrast to the second-millennium Mesopotamian accounts, see R. W. Younker, "Ancient Texts and the Bible's Account of Creation," *Shabbat Shalom*, Spring 2000, 20-22.

[38]Broyles, 49.

[39]Stuart, 27. Broyles, 49, compels us to listen when he says, "Revelation is packaged, in part, in a culture. If we claim the Bible is true in all that it affirms, than we must ask which statements are prescriptive of God's ways and which are merely descriptive of a culture's."

Before leaving historical analysis, we must note three important cautions in dealing with history:

1. The primary source for understanding and reconstructing the historical background is the Bible itself. We must compare Scripture with Scripture. When examining the passage, trust its content and context to lead you in uncovering the historical background.

2. Sometimes it is impossible to date a passage. In this case the best approach is to link the message of the passage with other parts of the same testament where there is a similar message that has a clear historical background and (precise?) date. Sometimes one can only situate the passage within the overall historical context of that Testament.

3. Be cautious about secondary literature, as a scholar's orientation may affect how he/she dates a passage. For example, critical scholars may see parts of the Bible as later additions, even non-genuine, and will date accordingly.[40] This caution holds true also for the use of Bible commentaries. While we can learn from those who have investigated and written on the text, the exegete must not uncritically accept the ideas forwarded in the commentaries, be they conservative, liberal, or any other label we may put on them. It is best for the interpreter to dialogue with these commentaries but not be dependent on them.

Theological Analysis

In theological analysis, we focus on what the passage is teaching us. Two foci come into view: the *descriptive* (what it *meant* to the biblical audience) and the *prescriptive* (what it *means* in building normative faith). In light of this, several factors must be considered:

1. Is there simply a description of cultural practices or a prescription of theological norms? For example, when Jacob worked seven years for a bride, was that descriptive or prescriptive? The same may be said of him (and numerous others) having more than one wife and even several concubines. Or, was Abraham's experience with Hagar a cultural practice or a theological norm? The same question holds for a host of issues, like levirate marriages and betrothal practices.

2. After keen observation of the text, following the steps outlined thus far, one must establish the central idea of the passage. Broyles is right that the "theological emphases should first be driven by the literary theme of the passage."[41] Indicate why this idea is central in the passage, and how the author makes it central. Does

---

[40]For an example of this, observe the ongoing debate about the date of the book of Daniel. See Gerhard F. Hasel, "Establishing a Date for the Book of Daniel," in *Symposium on Daniel*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 2 (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1986), 84-164.

[41]Broyles, 59.

this motif show development of a theological idea? In other words, does it illuminate an issue previously encountered in the biblical data? What priority is placed on this theme in light of theological issues in the Bible? For example, the New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34) is highlighted again in the NT (Heb 8:10-11), but the issue of Holy War in the OT receives no further treatment in the NT.

3. Situate the idea within the theology of the chapter, a section in the book, the book itself, the overall genre of the pericope, the Testament, and the Bible as a whole. Sometimes the Bible writers themselves reused earlier biblical texts and oracles. This is called "inner biblical exegesis."[42] The prophets reapplied previous messages to their contemporary situation.[43]

4. Relate this idea to the classical theological concepts (God, humankind, salvation, judgment, etc.). To what specific doctrine is it related? Is this relation explicitly or implicitly indicated? Where does it fit within the total corpus of revelation that makes up Christian theology?

5. Consideration must be given to the system of Hebrew and/or Greek thinking, since these are the systems in which the biblical material is couched.

6. Examine the passage parallel to the doctrine(s) of your own religious or faith community. Be careful, however, not to allow your own religious traditions to color or blind your vision to what the text is saying.

7. Find the secondary ideas and theological motifs of the passage. Indicate how they are related to the central idea.

[42]Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "Inner Biblical Exegesis as a Model for Bridging the 'Then' and 'Now' Gap: Hosea 12,1-6," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28 (1985): 33-46; S. L. Cook, "Innerbiblical Interpretation in Ezekiel 44," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 193-208; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament: The Ordering of Life in Israel and Early Judaism*, rev. ed., Oxford Bible Series, ed. P. R. Ackroyd and G. N. Stanton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 160-62. A commentary that uses this approach is A. E. Hill, *Malachi*, Anchor Bible, vol. 25D (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1998); see especially appendix C, 401-12.

[43]C. Patton, "'I Myself Gave Them Laws That Were Not Good': Ezekiel 20 and the Exodus Traditions," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* no. 69 (1996): 73-90; M. Hilton, "Babel Reversed—Daniel Chapter 5," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament,* no. 66 (1995): 99-112; E. C. Lucas, "Covenant, Treaty and Prophecy," *Themelios* 8 (1982): 19-23.

Relevance

Relevance deals with application and tells us what the text *means* for people living in the twenty-first century. [44] The text demands a response from the reader or hearer. It calls us to place our priorities within the priorities of the text itself.

In dealing with relevance, we must also be cognizant of our contemporary needs, issues, and circumstances. In other words, in order to meaningfully apply the text to our situation, we must be aware of what is happening in the world around us.

The following factors should be considered when establishing relevance:

1. The main point. The main theme or motif of the passage should be the driving force in helping us to relate it to our situation. We should be able to show how this main motif in the text is useful for us today. Be careful, however, not to force the idea—to make it say more than it intends.

2. General principles. While the biblical passage was directed to a specific person(s) in a historical setting, there are principles which may be derived from it that are applicable today. For example, while John 3:16 was expressed in the context of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus (a historical situation), we cannot deny the principle of the universality of God's love. Exegesis goes even further by taking this general principle and applying it as specifically as possible without doing violence to the text.

3. Life issues. The exegete should determine the aspect(s) of life with which the passage concerns itself. For example, 1 John 1:9 obviously deals with confession. So we must ask if confession is still a vital life issue today. Obviously, it is. As we dialogue with the text we need to ask, "What aspect(s) of life is the passage really concerned with? . . . What do 'I' or 'we' encounter today that is similar or at least closely related to what the passage deals with?"[45]

4. Purpose. Generally, any communication, oral or written, meets one of three purposes with some (considerable) overlapping: to entertain, to inform, to persuade. Obviously, while the biblical narrative may be entertaining,[46] this is certainly not the main thrust. It is more correct to say that the biblical message informs and educates us so that we may be persuaded or convicted to follow its

---

[44]Stuart, 40, says that to ignore this factor is to do injustice to the text. He correctly rejects the notion that exegesis is strictly historical, on three grounds: (1) it ignores the purpose of doing exegesis, namely, to hear and obey God's word; (2) it deals exclusively with the historical, thereby refusing to realize that God's word has present-day value; (3) it leaves the passage to the subjective interpretation of the hearer. As he puts it, "The exegete leaves the key function—response—completely to the subjective sensibilities of the reader or hearer, who knows the passage least." Ibid.

[45]Ibid., 41.

[46]For example, when Moses demanded how the golden calf came about, Aaron sheepishly claimed that he threw the precious metal into the fire, and out walked a golden calf.

mandate. To put it another way, the information fortifies our faith, which propels us to action. Biblical religion is not just head religion; it is a heart response.

5. Audience. To whom is this message most applicable? Is it personal or corporate? Even if a message is given to a corporate body, like the church, ultimately the individual must give a response. But this point is important precisely because the Bible, which is oriental in nature,[47] appeals largely to the group ethic. Even though individuals are called (e.g., Moses, Samuel, and Samson), they are appointed for purposes of the group. While the exegete must be aware of the "group" idea, he or she must be sensitive to the kinds of individuals to whom the message is most applicable: rich or poor, leaders or followers, Christian or non-Christian, and so forth.

6. Categorization. Stuart's questions are appropriate here:

Is the application directed toward matters that are primarily interpersonal in nature? Matters that relate to piety? To the relationship of God and people? Is the concern social, economic, religious, spiritual, familial, financial, etc.?[48]

We often tend to think that the biblical message is solely spiritual or religious. But we cannot ignore the fact that parts of the Bible deal with social issues,[49] economic matters,[50] marriage and the family,[51] and so forth. These must be faced for what they are and not merely spiritualized.

Interpretation

This is where the exegete pulls together the appropriate findings from his or her research. This is a process of integration: the data is gathered from the various steps and brought together in a coherent and logical form. This means that not all of the details must be included. The goal of exegesis is to illuminate the biblical passage. Sometimes, too many details, or extraneous materials, will obfuscate the passage. The goal then is missed. The exegete must be selective with the information. This requires that he or she "deploys rather than reports this information, arranging it into meaningful sections and patterns of argumentation

[47]Zdravko Stefanovic, "For the Asian First and Then for the Westerner, " *Asian Journal of Theology* 4 (1990): 412-13.

[48]Stuart, 42.

[49]For example, the book of Amos aims directly at the injustices of the rich against the poor. Cf. Acts 6:1-7.

[50]See Jer 32:6-12; Matt 22:15-22; Mark 12:41-44; 1 Tim 6:10.

[51]See Gen 2:24; 24:67; Cant 8:7; Matt 5:32; 1 Cor 7:10-11; Eph 5:28,33; Col 3:19.

so that the passage itself is unfolded in an illuminating fashion."[52] In working toward this ideal, experts generally suggest three formats:

1. Topical format. This is to mechanically follow the steps outlined above but with some sections rearranged, combined, or adjusted with a view toward presenting the data in the most logical and comprehensible fashion so that the reader may fully understand the meaning of the passage. This is the method I followed in my doctoral dissertation, which does exegesis of sixty-nine passages containing remnant terminology (*ipsissima verba*) in the book of Jeremiah.[53] It is reproduced here for the reader's benefit:

Following a close-reading approach, and taking the book as a single unit, all pericopes that contain specific remnant terminology are treated exegetically. This exegetical process incorporates four interrelated steps:

(a) Translation and textual considerations. This analysis of the text attends to grammatical and syntactical relationships, textual difficulties, and variants with ancient versions (notably the LXX), as denoted in *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. In each case, the entire pericope is translated with the text(s) having remnant terminology represented in italics.

(b) Structure. This shows the elemental blocks and framework of the passage in which the remnant passages are found.

(c) Historical background. This examines the situation, circumstances, people, and social milieu surrounding the event in which direct reference is made to the remnant. It also seeks to provide an approximate date for the occurrence.

(d) Interpretation. This is a commentary, integrating the information from all the steps previously described, so as to uncover the meaning of the passage as a whole, with focus placed on the remnant.

2. Commentary format. This is a verse-by-verse explanation of the passage, bringing together the relevant data that arise from each text. Sometimes each text is individually discussed, but at other times a block of texts (derived from the structural analysis of the passage) may be dealt with.

3. Discussion format. This is where the entire text is treated as a single unit and the commentary follows a free-flowing fashion without necessarily sticking to a methodical outline. Sections, subsections, and headings may not be used.

Guidelines for Sermon Development

If the exegete's data is to be used for a sermon, then the following guidelines may prove useful:

---

[52]Hayes and Holladay, 136. They add that an exegetical paper "may be full of factually correct information yet fail to illuminate or display an understanding of the passage in any appreciable form." Ibid.

[53]Kenneth D. Mulzac, "The Remnant Motif in the Context of Judgment and Salvation in the Book of Jeremiah," Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1995.

1. Follow the guidelines of sound homiletics. Make sure that the introduction contains the key idea which identifies the theme of the passage. Further, the introduction must have a transitional sentence that contains the key word, which indicates the main points of the sermon.

2. Let each main point arise from the text. Each must be related to the main idea of the passage. Hence, every point drives home the main idea a little deeper into the hearer's mind. The exegete-cum-preacher may use modern words or categories for each point, but they must clearly be related to the text.

3. Do not use the exegetical steps as the sermon outline. Can you imagine a sermon which begins, "Let us look at the textual analysis of the passage?" To a congregation this means nothing. The exegetical data *informs* the sermon. The preacher organizes it so as to best illuminate the meaning of the text.

4. Avoid sensory overload. Do not weigh down each main point with several subpoints and even sub-subpoints. Let the text speak in a simple, dynamic fashion, bringing the full weight of the exegetical data to each point.

5. Use illustrations, stories, examples, and so forth, which help to illuminate the text. In other words, everything serves the interest of the text.

6. Make application. Remember that the task of the sermon is not merely to inform the listener. The hearers must be motivated to apply the biblical mandate to life. It is only when the exegete comprehends the meaning of the passage that he or she can translate to life issues that affect the hearers. Stuart cautions, "Be sure that you construct a sermon that does not neglect a clear, practicable, and exegetically based application."[54]

---

[54]Stuart, 86.