

Exegesis: Necessity, Methods & Common Fallacies

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Introduction

Preaching is an honourable undertaking which, when one has faithfully and soundly executed from whatever podium is immensely rewarding as fulfilling. On the other hand, if the right approach or method of interpretation is not exploited, it leaves one with a sense of guilt and sadness. Many of us however opt to be public preachers in a local congregation rather than taking up the private quiet ministries of intercession, hospitality or even person to person evangelism. The reason is simply because these rather remote ministries do not bring us into the public eye where every one notices us or our gifting. Often, the caution from James is far from our minds (3:1a).

However, to every privilege, there is a corresponding responsibility carrying immense repercussions. This equally applies to the expounding of God's word, the Holy scriptures. In one sense, the scripture exposition repercussion differs from the rest because what we preach and teach from the written word must be in accord with sound doctrine (Titus 2:1). It must not only agree with but actually be theologically sound and correct. Any misrepresentation of this truth may lead someone to their eternal ruin or indeed into bad ethical practice. Further, God holds such teachers or preachers accountable hence the stricter judgment mentioned in the book of James (3:1b). Prudent, prior meticulous careful study and application of scripture is therefore mandatory (I Timothy 2: 15; I Timothy 4: 16).

Hermeneutics is key to understanding the Bible, using the right methods, principles and approaches (Klein et al 2020 p 19-20). We need to discover that crucial one single (not multiple levels of) meaning though applications may vary (Downing 2020). To help us properly interpret scripture and, as much as possible, maintain the fidelity to truth, a number of exegetical principles have been devised over time. These help us surmount challenges arising from cultural, time, geographic or language distance as we seek to correctly interpret the text (Klein et al 2004 p 13-16). These principles, once properly observed, reduce the chances of wrong teaching and indeed, faulty interpretation is minimized, although admittedly not entirely eliminated. In this self-same exegetical approach, the Bible is not only presuppositionally viewed and accepted as true,

perspicuously trust worthy and binding but taken as the actual word of God (I Thessalonians 2:13). Thus, the person tasked to expound this word, yea, a particular portion of scripture must do all they can to let the scripture speak and Christians obey.

In order to properly understand the issues relating to *exegesis*, we propose to consider this subject using several helpful sources including a series of articles produced by Dr Richard J Krejcir's "*Into thy word*" site¹ in addition to the monumental works by Dr W.R. Downing (*An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The issues, History, and principles of Biblical Interpretation*; 2020) and that Klein, Hubbard and Blomberg; *Introduction to principles of Biblical Interpretation*. We have of course summoned other sources beyond these two while freely adding our thoughts too. The "*Into thy word*" site hosts a number of related articles primarily set out to ensure a right understanding of scripture as well as its interpretation. We synthesize a set of at least ten articles in this paper including a paper by Professor William D Barrick relating to common Biblical exegetical fallacies². Together, all these resources form the basis of our literature review excursion for there is safety in the midst of wise counsel:

As we delve into the details, we need to define or state some preliminary points in order to clear our way:

1. What "*Exegesis*" is and means: This word basically has to do with the opening up, drawing out, leading out, objectively extracting out or understanding of a given passage of scripture, verse, book or set of them. In the language of Dr Downing (2020), it may be stated that: "*exegesis means 'to lead out, to unfold in teaching.' To bring out a meaning [of the original languages]...*" thus, "*...exegesis is an examination and explanation of the text from the original languages...*" (p 45). The person so intending to explain the scriptures must therefore be able to grasp the background scenario proceeding to explain what the author originally intended to communicated as well as how that message would have been received by the original audience (Keener 1993). The central message, main idea/ thesis statement(s) or outline and breakdown must be identified in the process (Klein et al 2004; Downing 2020). This task therefore includes searching out the root meaning of the words (etymology), the tense and possible connotations the word would have meant in the original language³ in which the text was written. If it be in Hebrew, as is the case for most for the Old Testament, the person expounding the scripture must dig out the facts explaining them beyond a shadow of doubt that this is verily what the text means or intends. Secondly, the task involves knowing the tense, gravity, intonation, tone and emotional response intended to be evoked by those words and finally, the task involves patching up all the ideas together and then constructing one cohesive whole

¹ Refer to: <http://www.intothyword.org/pages.asp?pageid=53490>.

² Refer <http://www.tms.edu/m/tmsj19a.pdf>.

³ Or to the original readership.

which gives sense and meaning. Briefly, that is what *exegesis* is about and entails.

2. Scripture should be viewed as inspired: The next critical point worth noting, though not forcefully brought out in number of our sources, but perhaps assumed, is that Scripture is inspired by God. In sync with Holy Scripture or the major historical confessions, we presuppositionally hold that all Scripture is God breathed⁴, both plenary and verbally (Young 1963; The London BCF 1689). The canon is entirely inspired from Genesis to Revelation. The extent of inspiration goes even to the very words (and ideas) as given in the original languages, not necessarily the translations or transliterations (Downing 2020; Riplinger 1994; Straub 2011). If the word is thus inspired, certain implications certainly come to the fore the first being that the Scriptures are Holy. Second, they (scriptures) are inerrant, trust worthy and binding on all that would call themselves Christians. Third, the scriptures reveal God in a special way unlike general revelation that points to God's existence⁵. An important note here though: the agents or human authors of the scriptures are not in themselves perfect but inspired or enabled by God to produce infallible scripture within a given epoch, being now ceased.
3. Let scripture speak and we obey: In terms of approaching the Holy Scriptures, the expounder must come with an open mind, to get what the Scriptures principally teach and say across the entire corpus campus with a view to rightly apply them. The scripture must first speak and then Christians obey, without any question. While modern man, humanists and higher critics (including the Jesus Seminar) would like to impose what they think is right on Scripture, the Christian has the opposite view and approach.
4. Do not speak into scripture but the reverse: This point is closely connected to the previous point except that the reader is discouraged (if not forbidden!) from interpreting scripture with their prejudiced spectacles, grids or *subjective* lenses (Barrick 2008). Never impose a meaning on Scripture or force it to fit into one's preference. Sound Theologians resist all manner of *eisegesis*⁶; imposing a meaning. Many of us are guilty of this because it seeps into our systems often in many subtle ways, at times unnoticed even by the exegete. Interpreters are to come with a humble spirit, disposition and spirit to hear what God has to say to them rather than the reverse. The post modern relative mind quarrels with the Scriptures on that score because the Bible speaks authoritatively and with a sense of finality. Absolutes are abhorred by the liberal mind. But when a person is genuinely regenerated, they willingly

⁴ II Timothy 3:16

⁵ Romans 1:19-21

⁶ Downing defines it as follows: "An illegitimate process of reading into the text one's own presuppositions, biases, doctrinal convictions, or peculiarities..." (p 339); "...is reading into the text a meaning which is not there. This may be done in various ways, such as by allegorizing or 'spiritualizing' the text..." (p 46);

submit to God's word as they are called to obedience (Romans 1:6). An additional thought: We may be guilty of imposing a meaning or thought on the passage that never was intended by the original authors, hence the importance of correct exegesis. A great example by Downing (2020 p 48-49) will illustrate what we mean. The Doctor gives an excellent example relating to the "Great Commission" text Matthew 28:19-20 where Jesus gives his final words and command(s). The traditional interpretation goes something like this: "*There are four imperatives in the text: 1. "Go" 2. "Make Disciples" 3. "Baptise" 4. "Teach". The Church must obey these!...*" Sounds "pietly" good but is that what the original emphasizes or intends to communicate? According to Downing⁷, the original has only one imperative "making disciples" not the rest. This only becomes apparent with a correct exegesis from the original.

5. Acquaint yourself with the word: If the Christian is to rightly and objectively interpret the word of God, they must have a wide canvas of the word of God in their system; the Biblical metanarrative, as it were. They must know what the Bible says or type of Scripture genre scattered right across the canon. With such deep hind sight, they are more likely to give a better overview as well as particular explanation of what the passage says. Partial or incomplete knowledge is dangerous, leading to wrong conclusions and therefore ethical practice.
6. Know the setting and background of each text: This is ever so important, to grasp and appreciate the connotation and meaning of certain phrases, words or stories. Knowing the context, culture, values and practice is key to a proper appreciation of a given text. For instance, some parables are difficult to understand as well as grasp their import unless one has an intelligent grasp of the background scenario (Keener 1993; Chueng 2014). Take the *seven* parable series in Matthew 13 for instance, one can easily misunderstand or misinterpret them. Carrying out a background check and grasp puts things into perspective and thus a correct *exegesis*.
7. Understand the genre you are considering and interpret it accordingly: As earlier alluded to, the type of scripture genre is key to an accurate *exegesis*. If the book is apocalyptic, historical, poetic or legal, the treatment will be different according to the respective genres (Klein et al 2004). For instance, if the book is prophetic, one dares not expound or interpret it the way one would a chronological historical or doctrinal book, although features from different genres overlap once in a while. Further, we may say that it is important to rightly categorise these scriptures and books lest we land in a ditch as well.

⁷ Downing says "*The Greek reads: "Having gone....baptizing...and teaching" as temporal participles all related to the main verb in aorist imperative "make disciples."*" He further adds: "Exegesis and exposition belong to the scriptures in the original languages; but only an exposition of the scripture in a second language." (p 48-49).

8. If possible, master the *etymology* of a given set of words, their arrangements in a sentence as well as their original language renderings: This point does not need to be over emphasised (Downing 2020). The root meaning (and tense) of each word is key to opening up scripture or any puzzling texts for that matter (Carson 2007; Vine 1996). This is why it is advisable that a Biblical scholar has a working knowledge of at least one of the original languages either Greek, Aramaic or Hebrew. It's best to know all of them but relatively rare. In fact, Downing (2020) makes a striking remark while defining the word *Exegesis* stating the following: "... *It is possible to have an exposition of a text from the English Bible, but not an exegesis, as the English Bible is only a version of a translation and varies in grammatical and syntactical nuances*" (p 340). There is a distinction between exegesis and exposition. This has huge implications! It entails that those reading a translation, of whatever language, out-side the original cannot realistically exegete but only analytically do an exposition of the probable meaning. To exegete requires both knowledge and proficiency in handling the original language texts. Elsewhere, Downing (2020) comes across even stronger in his assertion as follows:

...exegesis means "to lead out, to unfold in teaching." To bring out the meaning [of the original language]. Hermeneutics plays an integral part in the exegetical process....it must be noted that exegesis is only possible in the original languages, not in a translation or version, as inspiration does not pertain to the grammar or syntax of a second language. E.g., an exposition of the scripture in our English Bible is legitimate, but not an exegesis, which would presuppose the divine inspiration of the grammar and syntax of the English Bible, a fatal fallacy of most cults in the proof-text mentality and argumentation..." (p 45-46).

We think, in principle, he is right if he says it in the Martin Luther/Wycliffe/Tyndale spirit (and sense) rather than the Popish Roman Catholic spirit that created an elitist barrier or culture around the word of God. Thankfully, the Reformation would crash this erroneous view. Sadly, this latter kind of thinking (i.e. Popish elitism) is once again amongst us albeit, in a different veiled form. That said, a knowledge of the original Biblical languages, Latin or Arabic (especially for the islamologist/orientalist) is recommended though may not be essential, depending on one's speciality. As someone has rightly quipped, the knowing and using the original languages is akin to wearing x-ray glasses to see things more clearly through Scripture. More things became apparent that would ordinarily not have been possible in a translation language as some nuances are lost in translation in addition to the cumulative introduction of typo errors along the way by copyists⁸. We need to insert a strong caveat here: exegesis is not the

⁸ We may include grammatical errors too by translators, depending on the translation approach (literal, dynamic equivalence etc.). Benner gives (bearing in mind dynamic nature of languages) an example of an

exclusive preserve of comprehensively formally trained Theologians (i.e. exclusively seminary trained) as some elitists are won't to teach or believe in these degenerate days. If that were true, the Reformation spirit and cry would die. We may further argue that equally, the "Unschooling men"⁹ including our Lord Jesus were mistaken men, mere imposters while the Pharisaic party were right because licenced. That cannot be. Besides, several helpful tools are now available for the serious minded Bible moth. Jeff A Benner is a classic example of a self-taught Hebrew Linguist.¹⁰

9. Avoid the common fallacies related to Biblical *exegesis*. Drs. Barrick, Downing and Carson highlight some common fallacies (though they may not necessarily agree on every point to the same degree) often plaguing would be Bible exegetes. They highlight several of these (though not exhaustively) as listed below:

- a. Evidential Fallacies.
- b. Logical Fallacies.
- c. The Superior knowledge Fallacies.
- d. Word study fallacies.
- e. Fallacy of reading between the lines.
- f. The Hebrew Verb & Grammatical Fallacies.
- g. The Fallacy of Ignoring Particles.
- h. The Fallacy of reduction.
- i. New Testament Exclusion Fallacy.
- j. Presuppositional and Historical Fallacies.

We do not delve into expanding these points. Should readers want to drill deeper, we refer them to the sources we referenced. Ours was to trigger interest and awareness.

However, the last point (h) highlights the fact that the attitude of the individual exegete is extremely important because it is in the driving seat leading to whatever direction we wish to go. Many suppose the Old Testament is obsolete, obscure, a tattered thread bare garment with no relevance or bearing on the New. They suppose that there are no possible connections or continuities between the Testaments what so ever. That's an error. We need the whole of Scripture to cohesively speak and interpret the whole of scripture, both Old and New, of course bearing in mind relevant movements and revelational developments over time. The grand narrative was revealed over time. Christ

error in a translation found at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Mzsq8cPHgs&list=PLD16E9DF55B700E99&index=5;](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Mzsq8cPHgs&list=PLD16E9DF55B700E99&index=5)

[https://christianchat.com/bible-discussion-forum/jeff-benner-bible-critic-with-no-infallible-bible-to-believe-in.73761/.](https://christianchat.com/bible-discussion-forum/jeff-benner-bible-critic-with-no-infallible-bible-to-believe-in.73761/)

⁹ Acts 4:13

¹⁰Refer to: <https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/jeffbenner/>

came in the fullness of time such that what is abundantly clear now may not have been to the OT saints. That said, the mosaic tapestry of scripture is weaved using varied but meticulously orchestrated and arranged intertwined fabrics from both Testaments. Hebrews makes this clearer even referring to 'hard to understand' books like Leviticus to the time distance challenged Gentile reader like you and myself.

Take home lessons from this consideration

There are many lessons we may go away with but we list just a few below:

1. Exegesis and exposition are different but interconnected.
2. Exegesis happens when one is dealing with the original languages, relating to dialect grammar and syntax on the way to establish meaning.
3. Exposition could be done in a translated language, seeking to interpret and explain a passage of Scripture.
4. Christians need to invest time in internalizing a workable knowledge of the original languages; Hebrew, Aramiac and Greek in which the Bible was originally written.
5. Although not mandatory (i.e. point 4), there is great merit and advantage aiding accuracy in biblical passage understanding.
6. In the work of interpretation, several challenges confront the reader including cultural, geographical, language and time distance issues. These may affect the correct understanding and therefor interpretation of the text.
7. Correct interpretation aims at, among other things, discovering the authorial intent.
8. There is only one central truth or meaning of a given text with several applications. Some scholars argue that there are several layers of meaning in any text. This, then allows for varying interpretation methods including the allegorical as the literal.
9. Christians must repel the return of the elitist mentality within Academic and Church circles in some contexts. Every Christian can intelligently understand the Bible for themselves and not need well trained high minded "experts" to interpret scripture for them. Scripture is intelligible.

10. The Christian should avoid either extremes of Academic or experience only sort of thing towards Scripture. Dr Downing gives balanced advice towards how best to hold this aspect in tandem (Downing 2020 p 20-21).
11. Studying and understanding scripture is hard work demanding our utmost attention, since we are handling the inspired word of God.
12. Several presuppositions colour one's view or interpretation of scripture. Objectivity, with the right exegetical principles must be allowed to rule.
13. Christians must avoid *eisegesis* at all costs. It has a damaging effect on and misleads myriads.
14. Despite having been authored in the distant past, of a particular context and culture, the Bible is ever fresh, carrying the same inherently divine authority or relevance.
15. Reading several scholars on hermeneutics in relation to exegesis is very helpful. The sources in this paper were immensely helpful.
16. Christians must aim to internalise the biblical metanarrative into their systems so that they have the 'big picture' view of how different parts of scripture cohesively hold together. Without this, error, heresy and even cultism flourishes.
17. Scripture, and not Church tradition, is the final authority in all matters of authority relating to the Christian faith. Romanism is relentlessly attempting to turn things upside down. We see this everywhere. One place to look is their Seminary curriculum or program outline; clearly, the Church rides above scripture, which Louis Berkhof and JC Ryle mentioned in their writings years ago.
18. Christians should look out for the various fallacies highlighted in this paper and others besides. We may be guilty of one or more of these unawares.

Conclusion

In concluding our discourse, we can see that the points raised above summarise critical key exegetical principles in the quest to communicate to the whole world. Great credible sources help us. If their sound advice is heeded, we would definitely have fewer erroneous interpretations of the word of God. Novelty interpretation methods would by that token be curtailed and out of fashion, but not until then.

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