

Interpreting texts: Exegesis & Hermeneutics

CTM lay ministry course 'Digging into the New Testament'

Interpreting the Biblical texts for the current context is a significant responsibility in each generation.

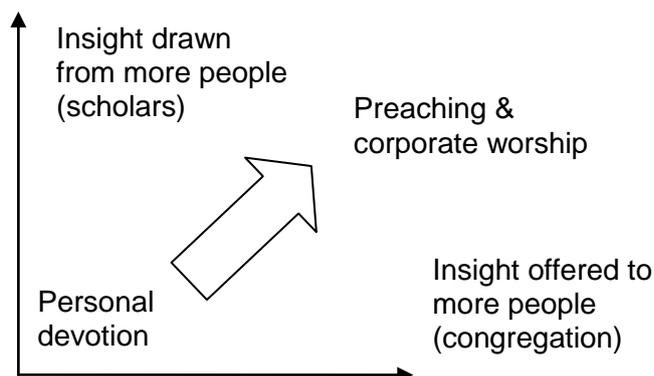
***Exegesis** is here used in the sense of discovering what a text meant in its original context.*

***Hermeneutics** is here used in the sense of discerning what that text means in a current context.*

***Criticism** is here used in the sense of critique as considered reflection, rather than rejection of ideas.*

*Sometimes the terms **Exegesis**, **Hermeneutics**, or **Biblical criticism** are used in the more general sense of the overall process of reading the Bible and seeking to understand its application to contemporary situations.*

Exegesis	Hermeneutics
what it meant	what it means
in its original context	in our context
Historical context: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographical place • Political structures • Religious communities • Social relationships & patterns 	Our personal & communal contexts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographic place • Political structures • Religious communities • Social relationships & patterns • Personal situation
Literary context & content: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location within Bible and book • Literary form, editing, structures • Characters, setting, plot • Sources • Summary or conclusion 	Literary context & content: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we hear stories today? • Which literary forms shape/dominate? • How can we counter dominant stories? • How might we re-tell the ancient stories in new ways?
Exegesis without hermeneutics produces an 'academic' result without relevance to the current context; no interpretation	Hermeneutics without exegesis produces an 'uninformed' result without relevance to the original context; poor interpretation
<p><i>Digging into the soil is hard work</i> <i>Interpreting Biblical texts is hard work</i> <i>But the results are productive</i></p>	
<p><i>Eisegesis / Isegesis is reading into a text rather than drawing meaning out of a text</i></p>	
Practical example: Read Mark 10:24 Matt 19:23 Luke 18.24 – 'the eye of a needle' What interpretations have you heard of this passage? What did the text mean in its original context? (hint: largest animal, smallest hole) What does the text mean in our contemporary context?	



A method for Exegesis and Hermeneutics

drawing on How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth (G. Fee & D. Stuart, 2003), and Method in Exegesis (D. Lee-Pollard, H. Wallace, and J. Squires, 1991).

Criticism is here used in the sense of critique as considered reflection, rather than rejection of ideas.

A. Establish the text

Read the passage through three times, and compare in three different translations. Note any variations in the translations used, and any footnotes in the NSRV (which indicate alternative readings in the reliable early manuscripts). [*textual criticism*]

B. Review the historical context

Bring to mind the historical context of the passage and its cultural & geographic setting. Remind yourself of the occasion and purpose of the book in its historical setting. Consult a Bible dictionary to review the context of the writer and original hearers of the text.

- What is the historical setting of the passage
 - for the historical Jesus or other characters
 - for the period of oral tradition behind the text
 - for the author's own community of hearers?
- Can we draw any conclusions about the historicity? [*historical criticism*]
- Can we discern the likely sources of the passage? [*source criticism*]

C. Analyse the literary context & content

Skim through the surrounding passages to remind yourself of the common themes around the passage you are reading. Read the passage again with a focus on the content.

- What literary forms are being used? (eg. parable, healing story, genealogy, poetry, exhortation, vision) [*form criticism*]
- Can you see where editing has taken place? How has the writer shaped the sources they had available? [*redaction criticism*]
- What literary, narrative and poetic techniques does the author employ? (eg repetition, images, rhetorical patterns) What structures are present in the passage? Do these indicate progression, or a central theme or idea, or repetition? What point does each part of the structure convey? Does the structure or language indicate a summary or conclusion? [*literary criticism*]
- What precedes and follows the passage? Does the passage mark the beginning or end of a section? Does this knowledge help in understanding the passage?

Note that the literary form of a passage shapes the type of analysis, and not all questions are equally relevant to every passage. Only note those which shed light on the passage, and allow the passage to dictate the tools you use and the questions you ask, rather than vice versa. This is the reason for reading the text several times before analysis begins.

D. Consider what the text meant

Draw the conclusions from the preceding exploration together to suggest what the text meant in its original context.

- Outline the structure of the passage as you see it in three or four sections
- From this structure note movement of the story or flow of the argument, attending to each section to show its theological meaning and the way it contributes to the meaning of the overall text.
- What would the text likely have meant to its original hearers?

E. Consider what the text means

- Biblical texts are ancient documents written for contexts very different from our own, but their meaning can be translated into our context by understanding their original meanings and drawing reasonable parallels between the two contexts, or addressing significant differences.
- Two basic rules for exegesis & hermeneutics:
 - ***a text cannot mean what it could never have meant to its author or original hearers;***
 - ***whenever we share a similar specific life situation with the first-century hearers, God's message to us is the same as God's message to them.***
- Remember to analyse rather than paraphrase: draw out the meaning rather than just repeating the text in different words, and express the meaning in your own words.
- Biblical commentaries and dictionaries can add background to your interpretation, expand your perspectives and introduce possibilities you may not have thought of, but your own reflections express the meaning of the text for you in your own context. [*the method of liberation theology*]

Expressing meaning without assuming historicity

- Devotional reading takes a text at face value as written directly to and for the reader, and considers what it might be saying to the reader in their current context.
- Differences between texts (e.g. between the Synoptic gospels, and John's Gospel) indicate that writers have interpreted historical events in different way.
- The 'historical-literary-critical' method acknowledges that the text was written for particular readers in other (very different) contexts to our own. This standard method does not assume that everything a text says necessarily occurred exactly as it is presented, in comparison to our modern sense of 'objective historical reality'.
- Scholarly debate continues about whether various events 'actually happened' historically as described; for many debates we cannot find a definitive answer, even if we believe there is a historical core to a few/some/many/most/all of the stories recorded in the Bible (e.g. the birth narratives in the various gospels).
- Remember that each author had particular purposes for communicating to their respective audiences, and the gospel writers give us concrete examples of how particular events are communicated differently (e.g. Jesus' baptism).
- ***To avoid assumptions about historicity (did it actually happen just as written?), we can use the present tense*** when referring to the Biblical narrative rather than the past tense as we do know what the Biblical text says. Using the present tense makes no assumptions about historicity one way or another, and comments only on the text itself. For example, rather than 'when Jesus walked on water ...', it is less ambiguous and more clear to use '***when Jesus walks on water in Mark's Gospel ...***' (but then of course we can appear to be making assumptions about the identity of the author of the first historical and second canonical gospel! So using 'the gospel according to Mark' acknowledges the 'traditional' authorship without assuming its 'historic factuality').