

Biblical Exegesis: An Introductory Overview

Introduction / Definitions:

- **Exegesis** – careful investigation of the original meaning of texts in their historical and literary contexts; the English word comes from a Greek verb meaning “to lead out of” (Greek “*ex*” = “out”; “*agein*” = “to lead/go/draw”); the process basically involves asking analytical questions about various aspects of the texts and their contexts
 - the opposite process is called **Eisegesis**, which means “reading [your own opinions] into” the text (*not* a good idea in biblical studies!)
- **Biblical Criticism / Critical Methods** – various ways of doing biblical exegesis; each has a specific goal and a specific set of questions; some methods are more historical, others more literary, others more sociological, theological, etc.
 - biblical “criticism” does not mean “criticizing” the text (i.e. what you don’t like or don’t agree with);
 - rather, it means asking “critical” questions, based on “criteria” that are as clear, careful, and objective as possible.
- **Hermeneutics** – the theory and methodology of interpretation, especially of scriptural texts; a branch of theology that deals with the principles underlying biblical exegesis.

Various Methods of Biblical Exegesis / Interpretation:

The following table lists many different approaches or methods of biblical interpretation, as grouped in the document “[The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church](#),” by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993).

A) The Historical-Critical Method	Questions Typically Asked:
Composition History Questions	Who is the author of the work? What do we know about him/her/them? Is the attributed author the actual author, or is the work pseudepigraphic? When, where, and under what circumstances was the work written? Who were the original recipients? Where did they live?
Traditional Literary Criticism	What words are used, and what range of meanings do they have? What images and symbols are used, and what do they signify? What characters appear in the story? What do we know about them? How are the characters related to one another in the story?
Comparison of Translations	Are there any significant differences between various modern translations? When were these translations done, using which translation philosophies? Which ancient Hebrew or Greek texts underlie the various translations? Has anything been lost or obscured in the process of translation?
Textual Criticism	Are there any variant readings in the ancient manuscripts? Are the variants negligible (mere spelling) or significant (affecting meaning)? Can the variants be explained as intentional changes, or as accidental ones? How do the literary or historical contexts help explain the variant readings?
Source Criticism	Does the text have any underlying source or sources? Which version of a source was used, in case there is more than one? What do the sources actually say and mean in their original contexts? How are the sources used (quoted, paraphrased, adapted?) in the later text?
Form Criticism	What is the literary form or “genre” of the whole work and the particular text? Does the text follow or diverge from the usual expectations for this genre? What is the normal purpose/goal of this genre? In what social context would texts of this genre have been used?
Redaction Criticism	How has the author used the source(s) in shaping this text? Are there any parallel texts, and how is this text similar and/or different? What particular views or theological emphases does this author show? How did the author’s life circumstances affect the shaping of the text?
Socio-Historical Criticism	If the story claims to be historical, what really happened? What social, historical, or cultural information can be gleaned from the text? What background information is necessary to better understand the text? What was life like for the common people, not just the ruling elites?

B) New Methods of Literary Analysis	Questions Typically Asked:
Rhetorical Analysis	What message is the author trying to convey? Is the author attempting to instruct, inspire, defend, or persuade the reader? What rhetorical techniques does he use to achieve his goals?
Narrative Analysis	Who are the characters in the story? What roles do they play? What is the plot sequence? What narrative time is covered? What is the author's and/or narrator's point of view?
Semiotic Analysis	What deeper patterns of meaning are conveyed by the words and symbols?
C) Approaches Based on Tradition	Questions Typically Asked:
Canonical Approach	Where does this text belong in the literary context of the entire Bible? How is this text related to prior texts and/or later texts in the Bible? How does its location in the Canon affect the meaning of this text?
Using Jewish Interpretative Traditions	How do traditional Jewish methods of interpretation read this text? Are there any parallel or similar stories in Rabbinic literature? Do Jewish and Christian interpretations of this text differ significantly?
History of Interpretation (<i>Wirkungsgeschichte</i>)	How was this text interpreted by the "Church Fathers" and in later centuries? Is the text interpreted differently by various churches and denominations? How has the text been interpreted in art, music, liturgy, and popular culture?
D) Apps. Using the Human Sciences	Questions Typically Asked:
Sociological Approach	What insights from Sociology can help in the interpretation of the text? What patterns of human social behavior are evident in the text?
Cultural Anthropology Approach	What models from Cultural Anthropology can help us understand the text? What cultural presuppositions/patterns affect the interpretation of the text?
Psychological/Psychoanalytical Apps.	How can the text be interpreted using various theories from Psychology? Can the text help us understand the human psyche better?
E) Contextual Approaches	Questions Typically Asked:
Liberationist Approach	Has this text been used for domination of oppressed people? How? Can this text be used for the liberation of the poor/disadvantaged? How? Can other texts counteract the detrimental effects of oppressive texts?
Feminist Approach	Does the text evidence gender bias? Was later interpretation also biased? How is the meaning of the text affected if read from a feminist perspective? What other texts can be recovered and used to balance out biased texts?

Methods of Exegesis/Interpretation	Advantages/Strengths of These Methods:	Disadvantages/Weaknesses of These Methods::
A) The Historical-Critical Method	.	.
B) New Methods of Literary Analysis	.	.
C) Approaches Based on Tradition	.	.
D) Approaches Using Human Sciences	.	.
E) Contextual Approaches	.	.
F) <i>Fundamentalist Interpretation</i>	.	.