BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

A Beginner's Handbook

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JOHN H. HAYES
CARL R. HOLLADAY

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CHAPTER 1

Introducing EXEGESIS

Exegesis as an Everyday Activity and as a Specialized Discipline

Exegesis is a normal activity in which all of us engage every day of our lives. Whenever we hear an oral statement or read a written one and seek to understand what has been said, we are engaging in exegesis.

The term "exegesis" itself comes from the Greek word *exegeomai* which basically meant "to lead out of." When applied to texts, it denoted the "reading out" of the meaning. The noun, therefore, could refer to "interpretation" or "explanation." Thus whenever we read a text or hear a statement which we seek to understand and interpret, we are involved in exegesis.

Although we do not today label our interpretation of oral and written words as "exegesis," this is nonetheless the activity in which we engage. Only when there is exegesis is there communication and understanding. When one person speaks to another person, the hearer must decide what is said and what is meant. Automatically, the hearer asks certain questions about what was said. Was it a question or a statement? Is the speaker seeking to communicate something? If so, what? Are the words spoken to be taken literally or are they conventional or symbolic statements or greetings? Am I, as the hearer, expected to respond? What thoughts is the speaker trying to convey? What form are the words spoken in? Is the speaker telling a joke? reporting some news? addressing a demand? asking for information? giving a lecture? trying to sell a product? As persons accustomed to speaking and listening, we can usually go through the process of exegesis without much effort, in fact, almost unconscious of the process itself.

Since such oral communication generally takes place in familiar situations and with familiar persons, we are able to assess the context and intentions of the speaker as well as to analyze the spoken words themselves. The context helps us to determine the larger complex in which the event of communication takes place and thus to understand the words spoken. Is it a superior and/or an official who is giving commands, offering directions, supplying information, or making suggestions? Is it a formal and/or structured situation in which the spoken words are to be taken seriously or merely a casual situation? Is it conversation between friends? Were the words spoken under normal or abnormal conditions? Part of the process of understanding oral communication, therefore, involves the context and occasion in which speech takes place. This means that the speaker, the words, the context, and the listener all participate in the communication process.

A similar but not identical situation takes place when we read texts or written words. Since the writer is generally not present when we read a text or a document, the words themselves assume a greater importance than in a situation of oral communication. It is true that readers can frequently, through imagination and prior knowledge, re-create in their minds something of the writer and the situation in which the text was written, when this is necessary. For exmple, if we receive letters from friends, we have some knowledge about the persons and their situations which informs our reading of the written words. Nevertheless, even in reading a letter from a friend or member of our family, we engage in exegesis. We seek to understand what is said and what it means. We interpret the words so as to understand what is being communicated.

Every day we interpret written texts with little or only very general knowledge about the writer. Here, communication takes place primarily between the text and the reader, and the writer, unlike the speaker in oral communication, becomes less important. It is true, of course, that the writer and the reader usually share a common world, common frames of reference, and a common understanding and use of language. To this extent, the writer and the reader are not very remote from one another. When one, for example, reads a highway sign or a traffic direction, it matters little who the writer of the words happens to be. All that is required is that the reader and the text on the sign share in a common linguistic field of reference. The written directions on the sign or the symbols used need only make sense to the reader and lend themselves to exegetical understanding. Even highway signs illustrate not only the necessity for exegesis but also the difficulties sometimes involved. For example, does a highway sign that reads "Road Construction 1500 Feet" mean that for the next 1500 feet a driver should expect construction activity or that after traveling 1500 feet a driver should expect to encounter construction activity? Such a message demands special exegesis and, in this case, the exegesis probably requires prior experience in understanding such signs.

We constantly read and exegete multiple forms of written texts. The average student in a day may read an assignment in a scientific textbook, a short story, a poem, labels on food containers, announcements of meetings and other events, a newspaper, a letter, an advertising brochure, the telephone directory, and on and on. All of these texts assume different forms of communication and represent different types or genres of written documents. Since these texts are all part of our normal culture, we have been socialized and acculturated into how to read and understand them in all their diversity. We know that one does not read and interpret a poem in the same way as a recipe nor the editorial page in the same manner as the front page of a newspaper.

Even in our culture, there are types of documents and literature which require special and intensive exegetical work. In fact, there are professions which specialize in the exegesis and interpretation of texts. The need for these arises from the nature of certain texts and their use of specialized and technical contents and terminology. Legal and judicial professions-lawyers and judges-spend much of their time exegeting laws and law codes and studying the history of their interpretation and application. Constitutional lawyers specialize in the exegesis of the constitution and the history of its interpretation. Diplomatic language and documents often require a special exegesis since communication in this area is frequently very sensitive and deliberately ambiguous.

The required effort and means necessary for the exegesis and interpretation of texts thus vary greatly, depending upon the nature of the texts and their relationship to normal communication. Some texts merely need to be read to be understood. Others require very detailed analysis. Some use normal, everyday language, grammar, and sentence structure. Others use a very specialized vocabulary, involved grammatical and sentence structure, and distinctive forms of expression. Some texts employ symbolic and metaphoric language. Others seek to employ language and words so as to limit severely the range of meaning and the potential for multiple interpretations and misunderstanding. Some texts seek to persuade. Others seek merely to inform. Some texts are produced to entertain. Others seek to produce some particular response and action.

The degree of difficulty involved in exegeting and interpreting a wide range of texts, and oral communication as well, depends upon two basic variables. (a) A primary factor involves the degree to which the sender (the speaker, author, or editor/collector) and the receiver (the hearer or reader).share a common world of discourse and experience. When two persons who share a common language talk or write to one another, very few problems of communication develop. Few difficulties are to be expected when they exegete and interpret one another's oral and written statements. The greater the difference between their normal fields of discourse and the greater the disparity between their range of experience, the greater will be the difficulty of their communication. They will experience greater difficulty in exegeting and interpreting each other's forms of communication and what is being communicated. For example, two persons from a similar rural environment or two persons from a similar urban environment would probably have little difficulty in communicating with each other whether in written or oral form. The situation, however, might be very different when the city dweller and the rural person seek to communicate.

(b) A further factor involves the extent to which the communication and the form in which it occurs involves specialized content and forms of expression. This point can be illustrated by using examples drawn from letter writing. Personal letters, one of the most common means of personal communication, are generally written in a straightforward manner and vary in content and form depending upon the degree of familiarity existing between the senders and receivers and the content to be communicated. As we all know, however, various types of letters require different approaches to interpretation and exegesis. Most letters-say from a friend or a parent-require little effort in understanding. A specialized letter-say from a technician describing some mechanical or chemical process or from an accountant explaining a bookkeeping procedure-is a totally different matter. In a similar fashion, an essay on Paris in the springtime would probably present fewer interpretive problems than an essay on the influence of Renaissance architecture on nineteenth-century constructions in Paris.

Complexity is introduced into the exegetical process by a number of factors. (1) The first of these is what can be called the "third-party perspective." Often in seeking to understand texts, the interpreter is not one of the primary or original parties in the communication event. In this case, the interpreter is neither the sender nor the receiver but a third party who is, in a sense, an outsider, an observer, or even an intruder. Letters, for example, are much more difficult to interpret when being read by a third party. In such a situation, the parties to the original communication may be totally unknown to the interpreter. Generally most documents are best understood when the sender has some prior knowledge of the receiver and the receiver has some prior acquaintance with the sender. This makes it possible for the sender to hypothesize how the communication will be received and understood and thus shape and express the communication accordingly. The receiver in like fashion can hypothesize about the sender so as to understand better both the content and the shape of the communication. The third party must seek to understand the communication by assuming the role of or by empathizing with both the sender and the receiver. The interpreter must try to read the document 'as if' the interpreter were both the sender and the receiver. This requires the interpreter-the third party-to search out information about both the sender and the receiver and their situations. When the content or form of the document is very specialized, unique, or ambiguous, this process is required to an even greater degree.

(2) A second complexity is introduced when the text or document is composed in a language different from that of the interpreter or exegete. Here a language barrier intrudes into the interpretive or exegetical process. If an English speaking person wants to read a German language textbook or receives a letter from a German, for example, the reader or interpreter is confronted with special problems. The English interpreter must either acquire sufficient knowledge of German to read the text or resort to a translator who can aid in overcoming the language barrier. Since each language has its own distinctive structure, grammatical features, and vocabulary nuances, it is very difficult for an outsider toacquire the proficiency of the native. When translations are made they are themselves already interpretations, since it is never possible for a translation to be an exact one-to-one transference from one language to another. An interpretation of a translation is what might be called a "second-level interpretation.' 'A first-level interpretation is the interpretation made of the original, whether by a native speaker or hearer or by one who has acquired knowledge of the original language. What appears in a translation is the translator's understanding of the original. The second level of interpretation enters the picture when an interpreter seeks to understand the content of the translation. Although translations help to bridge the gap between one language and another, they can never do so completely.

(3) A third factor which frequently must be taken into consideration in the exegesis of texts is what might be called the "cultural gap." Documents produced in one cultural context and exegeted in another cultural

context present certain problems to the interpreter. There are two reasons for this. First of all, such a document may explicitly mention, describe, or allude to special ideas, practices, and customs which would be clearly understood by a person reading the document in the original culture but which baffle a reader in a different culture. In the second place, communication within a culture frequently assumes a shared body of cultural understanding. This general reservoir of experience, worldview, and perception which lies behind the text would not be shared by the cultural outsider. A document, for example, reporting the actions and outcome of a particular sporting event, say a baseball game or a cricket match, would present difficulties in interpretation for a person living in a culture where the sport and its rules of play were unknown phenomena. This difference in cultures is not just related to ideas, concepts, and worldviews. Also involved are differences in the way things are said and written and the customary way of reading and interpreting. In some cultures, for example, when one tells a story, the first character to be mentioned is always the villain. Generally, the more remote and different the culture presupposed and reflected in the document from that of the interpreter, the greater the difficulty the exegete encounters in interpreting the text.

(4) A fourth factor which can introduce perplexity in exegeting texts is what can be called "the historical gap." A person in the present studying a document from the past is separated chronologically from the time when the document was produced. The gap between the past and the present does not have to be great in order to see this factor in operation and to experience some of its consequences.

Reading a newspaper that is, let us say, fifty years old, can be a fascinating and question-raising experience. One notices, for example, differences from the present in clothing fashions, in prices for advertised items, in issues that were the concerns of the day, in the manner in which articles were written, and on and on. Questions arise immediately. Why were things that way? Why were certain issues and events considered important? How could prices be so low? How could people have thought and reacted the way they did? When we read documents from the more distant past-say from the days of ancient Greece and Rome-we often encounter matters that are a "world apart" from the present-persons and places, practices and perspectives, customs and conventions, and so on. This is why editions of the ancient classics are often provided with notes to explain historical facts and features that are anchored in the past and no longer a part of the living present.

(5) A fifth factor that can complicate the exegetical process is the fact that documents are sometimes the products of collective and historical growth. This means that documents are, on occasion, not the product of a single author nor even of one particular period of time. The United States constitution, for example, was produced by a constitutional convention and many figures contributed to its formation. In addition, the original document has been added to in the form of amendments. We are all familiar with different editions of textbooks. Often a textbook, written by one author, will be revised by a second author so that it may no longer be possible to distinguish original material from added material unless we have access to the various editions. College and university catalogues are representative of literature that has come into being through growth and collective contributions. Much information in a current catalogue may have been there since the first catalogue published by the school. Other items may be the results of recent policy decisions. If a researcher wished to explore the development of the school's policies and curriculum but possessed only the current catalogue, it would be a formidable if not an impossible feat! By comparison of the catalogue with information gained from other sources, it might be possible to deduce some conclusions. For example, one could hypothesize when courses in nuclear physics or liberation theology were introduced or when coeducational dormitories became permissible.

In the ancient world, there was a far greater tendency for works to be the product of collective growth than is currently the case. Even in medieval times, writers often sought not to be original. Instead they frequently edited and combined older works which, sometimes, were themselves already edited and augmented works. This means that ancient works were frequently the products of a long and complex editorial process and contained layers or strata of materials and traditions. The ancient Jewish historian, Josephus, for example, utilized assistants in his writing, so that some of his works were really the product of a joint effort. In addition, he frequently incorporated or rewrote sources without acknowledging that he was actually doing this or informing the reader about the sources being used. In defense of Josephus and many of his ancient counterparts, however, it must be noted that this was fairly common practice in those times before the rise of the modern interest in authors and authorship and the development of copyright laws. The results of this process of growth and historical development can occasionally be seen in "seams"in the material, anachronisms in the text, differences in style, and even contradictions in the contents. In the exegetical study of such documents, this character of the texts must be taken into consideration.

One further consideration should be noted at this point about literary productions in antiquity. Works were sometimes produced as if they were the work of someone else, generally some venerable figure from the past. A writer, at a later point in time, would produce a work and attribute it to a person of the remote or recent past. Occasionally such writers probably felt they were expressing what would have been the thoughts of the one under whose name they wrote, maybe even preserving some authentic material. Sometimes such works were produced by students or followers of important figures in order to pass on their teacher's or leader's legacy. Works produced this way tended to be associated with and attributed to the revered personality rather than to the students or the followers since such works could embody the former's thought and the latter were generally less well-known. An example of this would be the numerous philosophical treatises attributed to Aristotle, now known to be spurious and written many years after his death. Occasionally persons followed this practice to give their works an authoritative appeal. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in the enormous amount of literature that was written under the name of Enoch to whom the Bible gives only incidental notice (see Genesis 4:17–18; 5:18–24). None of these Enochian writings made their way into the Scriptures although they are referred to in Jude 14-15. Generally the nature of such works, called pseudepigraphs, can be discovered by analyzing the texts from literary, linguistic, and historical perspectives.

(6) A sixth factor which can contribute to complexity and difficulty in the exegetical process is the existence of multiple and differing texts of the same documents. Frequently two or more copies of a given document exist but with lesser or greater differences between the copies. At this point, the interpreter is confronted with the problem of determining the actual wording of the text to be interpreted. Differences between copies of the same work are much more common for ancient than for modern works. The issue of divergent texts of the same work, however, is not unknown even after the use of the printing press became widespread in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For example, many of the plays of Shakespeare exist in significantly differing texts, so much so, that the study of texts of Shakespeare's plays has been a highly developed and controversial field. Before the use of the printing press, copies of texts were always made by hand. Handcopying of any text of any length generally results in varying numbers of mistakes-such as misspellings, omitted words or units, repeated words or units, and so forth. We possess few texts from antiquity in their original form, the so-called autographs. Most often what we have are actually copies of copies of the original. Since no one copy of any text of major size agrees exactly with another copy of the same text, this requires the exegete to confront the problem of the text in its original or authorial form.

The problem of multiple and differing texts of the same work can become more complicated when differences between texts are also represented in several languages. If differences between various copies exist but all the copies are in the same language, this presents the problem in one dimension. If there are diverging copies of the same work in several languages, this adds another dimension. Copies of manuscripts of Aristole's works, for example, exist in Greek, Latin, and Arabic. Where there are significant differences between these, the exegete must work across language boundaries in order to try and discover what appears to be the most likely reading.

(7) A seventh and final factor to be considered in noting the complexities that can develop in exegesis is the fact that some texts are considered sacred and thus different in some fashion from all other works. To treat a text as sacred in some sense involves more than treating it as good literature or as a classical work.

We are all familiar with the concept of the classical works of Western literature reflected in introductory English literature anthologies. There are certain well-accepted criteria by which literary works are recognized as "classics." Among these are the following: (a) a work must be well-written and a good example of its genre; (b) it must engage isssues and concerns that are reflective of recurring human conditions; and (c) it must possess a quality which lends itself to multiple if not infinite interpretability, that is, it must be open to diverse readings and understandings.

A sacred text may possess some or all of the characteristics of a classic. Other dimensions enter the picture, however, when the work falls into the category of the sacred. About classical works, people hold opinions; about sacred texts, they hold convictions. Sacred texts belong to the category of Scripture. There are several characteristics of "Scripture." (a) Scripture possesses an authority for someone or some group that exceeds normal conditions. This is true whether one is speaking metaphorically about the fisher's or hunter's or stamp collector's "bible" or realistically about the Moslem Koran or the Jewish and Christian Bibles. (b) As authoritative documents, Scriptures occupy an official position in the life of the communities or groups that regard them as Scripture. They are sources to which appeal is made and whose contents inform in a special way the lives of certain communities and their members. (c) Scriptures are understood as embodying a truer or better reflection and understanding of reality than is the case with other writings. (d) Reality itself or the voice, thought, or word of God is believed to be related to Scriptures in a way that is not true of other writings.

By their very nature, Scriptures bear special relationships to the communities that consider them sacred. The communities have frequently participated in their formation. Their sacredness is based on the fact that communities have chosen to assign them a special place and a special role. In addition, the manner in which the communities have understood and interpreted their Scriptures becomes a decisive influence in how they are assessed. Around Scriptures, there also develop assumptions and systems of thought that are often taken for granted as being both the result of the Scriptures' interpretation and as the standard by which they are to be interpreted or the lens through which they should be read. Around Scriptures, there develops a tradition of both what the texts say and how they are to be read. One who would exegete a sacred text thus stands in some fashion within a tradition with a long history in which the texts have interacted with the tradition and the tradition with the texts.

In this section, we have noted that exegesis is an activity in which all people engage when they interpret oral and written texts. Secondly, we noted that some conditions and texts require special efforts at interpretation and that exegesis can be a special discipline. Thirdly, we noted some factors that can complicate the exegetical process and make necessary certain special operations, special training, and special tools.

The Bible and Exegesis

Biblical exegesis belongs to the category of specialized exegesis. Reading and understanding the Bible are undertakings different in degree from reading and understanding a letter from a friend, an article in a contemporary magazine, a newspaper account of some event, or a modern novel or short story. The various complexities which can influence the exegetical process noted in the previous section are all related in one way or another to biblical exegesis. Let us note how all seven of these factors enter the picture in biblical exegesis.

(I) None of the Bible was originally addressed to the modern reader and interpreter. None of us was involved in the original communication

events as either senders or receivers. Paul's letters, for example, were written to the Romans, the Galatians, the Corinthians, and others. The modern interpreter, in the case of Paul, is therefore reading somebody else's mail. The books of Luke and Acts were accounts written for someone named Theophilus. These illustrations make clear that as students interpreting biblical materials we are, in a sense, third-party intruders and suffer from third-party perspectives.

(2) None of the Bible was originally composed in a modern language. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and Aramaic and the New Testament in Greek. Even the modern Israeli who speaks Hebrew or the modern Greek who speaks Greek recognizes that the languages of the Bible are not the same as modern Hebrew and Greek. Thus all modern exegetes, in interpreting the Bible, encounter the problem of a language barrier.

(3) The modern readers of the Bible and the original readers of the texts are separated by an enormous cultural gap. The culture presupposed by the Bible is that of the ancient Mediterranean world in general and Palestine in particular. One has only to note a few general characteristics of biblical culture to sense its difference from much modem culture. The social structures presupposed by the writers of biblical materials were patriarchal and authoritarian. The dominant economic system was agriculturally and village based. Diets were seasonal. Medical arts were primitive. Machines were little developed. Slavery was widespread. General mortality, and especially infant mortality, rates were high. Travel was slow and difficult. Life was rather simple and characterized by stability and similarity rather than change. Human life was oriented to the cycles of nature and climate. Entertainment was limited. Good artificial lighting did not exist. Animals were slaughtered, dressed, and burned on altars as an integral part of worship. Divine beings, both good and bad, were assumed to be participants in the ongoing course of life and history.

(4) The historical gap that separates the present from the world of the Bible ranges from almost twenty centuries to over three millennia. The biblical traditions came into being during a period extending over twelve centuries. These factors suggest two reasons why the exegete must bridge this historical gap. First of all, the Bible originated within a context chronologically far removed from the present. Secondly, since the materials originated over such a long period of time, it becomes necessary to understand the different historical contexts within which the various books and traditions of the Bible came into being. In addition to

these two considerations, there are two factors internal to the Bible itself which demand historical attention on the part of the exegete. First, much of the Bible takes the form of historical narrative. To call the Bible a history book is a misleading simplifcation but it does point to the fact that much of the material is concerned with historical matters. This phenomenon cannot be ignored if one is to understand the Bible. Secondly, much of the thought and theology of the Bible is expressed in terms of past, present, and future, that is, in terms of a theology which both takes seriously the course of historical events and is expressed in categories dependent upon historical perspectives.

(5) The gradual growth of traditions and collective contributions to documents are clearly evident in the Bible, especially the Old Testament. In fact, it is impossible to speak of particular authors of documents in the Old Testament since we do not know who wrote a single book. Instead, most of the works appear to have developed over lesser and greater lengths of time and many persons probably contributed to their formation. If we take Amos as a typical example of a prophetical book, we can see the diversity of material in the book which makes it impossible to speak of Amos as the author. In the book, we find four types of material. (a) A superscription provides some historical data about the prophet (1:1). (b) Much of the book consists of oracles or speeches attributed to the prophet (1:2—6:14; W-14; 9:5-15). (c) Some material is biographical, like the superscription, and speaks of the prophet in the third person (7:10–17). (d) Other material reports visions by the prophet and appears to be autobiographical with the prophet referring to himself in the first person (7:1–9; 8:1–3; 9:1–4). This diversity in the book suggests that it was clearly an edited work produced by someone other than the prophet himself. Practically all of the prophetic books manifest this same type of diversity.

Another way of looking at the books as the product of collective growth and authorship, in addition to the diversity in types of literary material, is to note changes in content and perspective or differences in historical conditions presupposed. Since the Middle Ages, scholars have noted that the historical conditions, the style of the speeches, and the content of Isaiah l-39 differ from Isaiah 40-66. The former presupposes a struggling state of Judah defending itself against the aggressive and powerful Assyrian empire. The latter assumes that the Judeans are in exile and that a faltering Babylonian empire is the major political power. The former thus presupposes the historical conditions of the eighth century B.C. and the latter those of the sixth century B.C. To exegete and

interpret the latter half of Isaiah as if it came from the eighth century would be like interpreting a contemporary document as if it came from the eighteenth century. The book of Isaiah, therefore, like many portions of the Old Testament, must be viewed as an anthology of materials coming from different periods.

(6) As with most documents from antiquity, the oldest manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments we possess are copies made long after the original documents were written. The oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible dates from the Middle Ages (the copy was made in A.D. 1008). The oldest complete manuscript of the New Testament dates from the fourth century A.D. About 5,000 different Greek manuscripts or fragments of the New Testament are known. Of these, no two are identical. The manuscript copies of the Hebrew Bible or parts thereof are less numerous. In recent years, however, older fragments and almost complete manuscripts of some books of the Old Testament have been discovered in caves and other places in the Dead Sea region of Palestine. Some of these show considerable differences from the standard Hebrew texts.

Since the Bible was translated into other languages-such as Syriac, Latin, and Coptic—quite early, these early versions also enter the picture in any attempt to determine the text of a passage or book. This is particularly the case with the Old Testament which was translated into Greek and Aramaic during the last centuries B.C. and the early centuries A.D. In addition, the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) also exist in an early Hebrew form known as Samaritan which differs frequently from the standard Hebrew text. All of this means, of course, that textual studies in one form or another are indispensable in biblical exegesis.

(7) That the Bible falls into the category of sacred Scripture needs no special comment. Two matters, one positive and one negative, should be noted. Positively, today's biblical exegete has been preceded by centuries of biblical study and interpretation which can be drawn upon for perspectives and insights. Negatively, the Bible as sacred Scripture has been surrounded by tradition and traditional interpretations of various sorts. The exegete is frequently tempted to read the text in light of the tradition without any critical judgment or without letting the text speak afresh and on its own. To do this is to engage in *eisegesis*, a "reading into," rather than exegesis, a "reading out of."

The above considerations might seem to suggest that exegesis of the Bible is a formidable if not impossible task. This might be the case if the

Bible in its manuscript and translated forms were a newly discovered ancient document and one had to approach its interpretation de *novo*—that is, learn all the languages, prepare the tools, and do all the necessary research. The biblical exegete, however, does not have to do this. Thousands of others throughout the centuries have interpreted the Bible, prepared tools available to the contemporary interpreter, and developed methods of approaching the problems and issues involved. Probably no other book has been so studied as the Bible, and tools for such study have been prepared by scholars who have spent their lives engaged in biblical exegesis and interpretation.

Biblical Exegesis Through the Centuries

From their earliest days, the synagogue and the church have engaged in the exegesis of their Scriptures. As believing communities with a body of sacred literature, Judaism and Christianity have continuously sought to understand their Scriptures, to explain their contents, to appropriate their meaning, and to apply and embody their teaching. The manner in which this has been done has varied throughout history. In some respects, however, the history of Judaism and Christianity can be viewed as the history of their interpretation of the Scriptures. Their understanding of the task of interpretation and how this task was to be carried out reflects much about the communities' self-consciousness and their relationship to the culture and thought within which they have found themselves.

Very broadly speaking, the history of biblical exegesis may be divided into three major periods with each of these reflecting particular interests and characteristics. These are (1) the early and medieval period, (2) the period of the Reformation with its roots in late medieval Jewish scholarship and the Renaissance, and (3) the modem period characterized by the attempt to work out clearly defined methods and programs of exegesis. Any such historical scheme must be understood, however, as an oversimplification of a much more complex situation.

(1) The early phase of biblical interpretation was characterized by the assumption that the faith and practices of the communities were identical with and directly authorized by the teachings of the Bible. Thefaith and practices of the communities were considered divinely ordained. Similarly, the Bible was considered divinely given. Thus, it was presumed that the Bible taught what the communities believed and practiced. Interpreters of the Bible believed themselves to be discerning and

expounding the will and mind of God as these had been given to the biblical writers and embodied in the texts. Everything in the Bible--even difficulties and problems in the text---could be assumed to be revelation. One rabbi advised: "Search it and search it, for everything is in it."

Ancient interpreters recognized that biblical exegesis was a specialized discipline and discussed methods and rules for its interpretation. Rabbi Hillel (d. beginning of the first century A.D.) formulated seven rules for interpreting Scripture and for arguing from Scripture to legal conclusions. These were expanded to thirteen by Rabbi Ishmael in the second century and were subsequently modified and enlarged. The Christian scholar, Tyconius (d. about 400), also drew up seven rules to be used in understanding biblical texts.

Generally, however, the theology of the communities and the interpreters determined the results of the exegesis and interpretation of the Scriptures in this early period. This was especially the case with the Christian use of the Old Testament. In describing methods for interpreting the Bible, Saint Augustine (d. 430), for example, argued the following: "Every student of the Divine Scriptures must exercise himself, having found nothing else in them except, first, that God is to be loved for Himself, and his neighbor for the sake of God; second, that he is to love God with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his mind; and third, that he should love his neighbor as himself, that is, so that all love for our neighbor should, like all love for ourselves, be referred to God." If a text did not teach this, it was not to be interpreted at face value: "Whatever appears in the divine Word that does not literally pertain to virtuous behavior or to the truth of faith you must take to be figurative." This often meant ignoring the "precise meaning which the author ... intends to express." He further advised his readers that "when investigation reveals an uncertainty. .. the rule of faith should be consulted as it is found in the more open places of Scripture and in the authority of the Church."

When Augustine talked about taking texts "figuratively," he was referring to the practice of finding a hidden or secondary meaning behind the actual statements and words of Scripture. This practice of finding levels of meanings within texts was widely used in the ancient world. The Stoics had employed such allegorical interpretation so that ancient texts, such as Homer, could be read in a manner that would explain away the unacceptable features in a text and allow the "reading in" of acceptable philosophical and ethical ideas. This approach was greatly developed in the Egyptian city of Alexandria and was applied to the Old Testament by the Jewish exegete Philo (d. about A.D. 50).

The Christian scholar Origen (d. about 254) argued that all biblical texts could have more than one meaning "for just as man consists of body, soul and spirit, so in the same way does the scripture." Some texts, he concluded, since their straightforward meaning did not agree with standard theology or ethics, "have no bodily sense at all, (and) there are occasions when we must seek only for the soul and the spirit, as it were, of the passage." All texts could thus be taken as having a special, secondary spiritual (symbolic, typological, or allegorical) meaning and at times the straightforward meaning could be totally ignored.

This approach could be applied not only to difficult and unedifying texts but also could be used to allegorize other texts. The classical example of this is Augustine's analysis of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). Augustine said the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho refers to Adam. Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace from whose blessedness Adam fell. Jericho means the moon and stands for human mortality, for the moon is born, waxes, wanes, and dies. The thieves who attacked Adam are the devil and his angels. They stripped him of his immortality and beat him by persuading him to sin. They left him half dead. The priest and the Levite who passed the man by without helping him are the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament which cannot bring salvation. The term Samaritan is taken to mean Guardian, so it refers to Jesus himself. The binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin. Oil is the comfort of good hope and wine is the exhortation to work with fervent spirit. The beast on which the man was placed signifies the flesh in which Christ appeared among men. Being set on the beast means belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn to which the man is taken is the church where persons are refreshed on their pilgrimage of return to the heavenly city. The two pieces of money that the good Samaritan gave to the innkeeper are the promise of this life and of that to come or else the two main sacraments. The innkeeper is the Apostle Paul.

Not everyone in the early church favored seeking multiple meanings in the interpretation of the text. A group of interpreters, the so-called school of Antioch, advocated a more literal and straightforward reading of the material. They argued that a typological or prophetic reading of an Old Testament text should be engaged in only when it did not do violence to the staightforward meaning.

Eventually, the practice of finding multiple meanings in texts dominated. The standard practice throughout most of the Middle Ages was to exegete so as to discover four meanings in a text: (a) the literal (or straightforward or historical) meaning, (b) the allegorical (or spiritualized or symbolic) meaning, (c) the tropological (or moral or ethical) meaning, and (d) the anagogical (or eschatological or heavenly) meaning. A short medieval Latin poem gave expression to this approach:

> The letter shows us what God and our fathers did;
> The allegory shows us where our faith is hid;
> The moral meaning gives us rules of daily life;
> The anagogy shows us where we end our strife.

Jewish exegesis tended to adhere somewhat more closely to the straightforward meaning. This was encouraged by Judaism's less philosophical theology and a greater desire to follow the explicit edicts and teachings of the biblical texts. Nonetheless, even Jewish exegesis devised a fourfold interpretation of texts: (a) *peshat* (the plain meaning), (b)*remez* (allusion or allegory), (c) *derash* (the homiletical), and (d) *sod* (the mystical or secret).

(2) In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, important shifts of perspective occurred in biblical interpretation and exegesis. The impetus for some of these shifts came from Jewish scholarship of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Scholars like Ibn Ezra (d. 1167) and Rashi (d. 1105) stressed the grammatical analysis of texts which had as its goal the elucidation of the plain meaning (*peshat*) of texts. Renaissance scholars of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries rediscovered early classical tradition and texts, and they formulated approaches for their interpretation.

(a) Interpretation broke with the desire to find multiple meanings in biblical texts while holding to the inspiration of the Scriptures. Martin Luther (d. 1546), for example, declared: "The Holy Spirit is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and earth, and therefore His words cannot have more than one, and that the very simplest, sense, which we call the literal, ordinary, natural, sense."

(b) There was a break with traditional interpretation as the best means of understanding texts. Throughout the Middle Ages, interpretation often meant nothing more than noting what the church fathers and major authorities had said about a text. The new impetus tended to bypass tradition in hopes of allowing the texts to speak on their own.

(c) Translations into the common languages meant a break with the Christian custom of using the Bible only in Latin. This development raised the problem of which text was to be used in making translations and stimulated the study of Hebrew and Greek as well as the printing of texts in the original biblical languages.

(d) The freedom granted interpreters in Protestantism, rather than producing the unanimity of opinion that the reformers had rather naively assumed would result, led instead to a multitude of opinions all believed to be based on sound exegesis and interpretation. Quickly it became obvious that the theological stance and historical situation of the interpreters played an important role in exegesis.

(e) The development of secular learning-philosophy, science, and general humanistic thought-meant that the Bible was no longer taken as the final authority on many matters. Reason came to occupy an important role in human culture and came into conflict with worldviews and systems of thought based on the Bible, revelation, and tradition.

(f) Historical perspectives on all matters, including the Bible, became an important factor. In the medieval world, the past and present tended to blend into a unified whole. There was little sense of the past as past. The past was viewed as an earlier expression of the present. With the development of history as a discipline, the chronological and cultural gaps between the present and the past became more and more obvious. With this came the recognition that the Bible was a book anchored in the past both in origin and in outlook.

(3) The modem period of biblical interpretation, extending from the Enlightenment to the present, may be said to be characterized by one general overall aim: to study and understand the biblical documents as one would any other set of documents from antiquity. Issues such as the historical setting of both the biblical documents and their writers and the role and function of the biblical materials in their original contexts came to the forefront alongside the analysis of their contents. This does not mean that the Bible was not examined for its religious value nor that it was no longer viewed as revelatory material. What happened was that the Bible came to be studied for a variety of reasons and was subjected to a variety of methodological approaches. The Bible could be studied as the means to a number of goals. It could be studied to reconstruct the history and religion of Israel and the early church. It could be studied as the literary remains of early cultures. It could be studied as the foundation documents of two great movements-Judaism and Christianity. It could be studied for its aesthetic and artistic values. These, and other interests, took their place alongside study of the Bible for its religious values and theological insights. The exegetical approaches and procedures which developed to facilitate all of these interests will be the concern of subsequent chapters in this handbook.

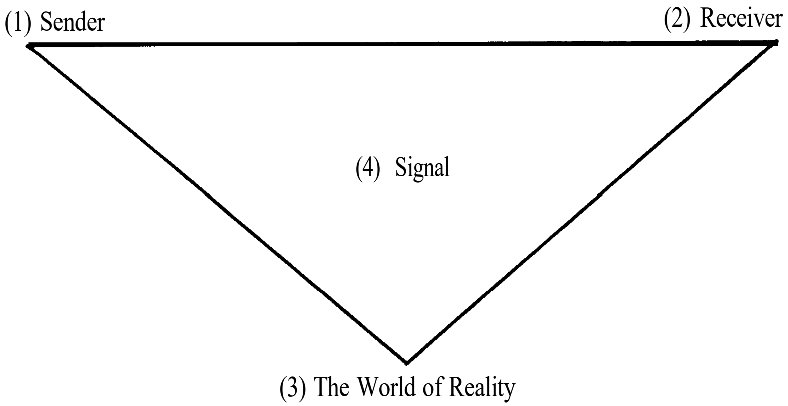
The Task of Biblical Exegesis

Exegesis is best thought of as a systematic way of interpreting a text. As noted earlier, everyone engages in exegesis in one form or another, but biblical exegesis has its own specialized needs and disciplines. Its goal, however, is quite simple: to reach an informed understanding of the text. This is different from saying that the exegete seeks to determine *the* meaning of the text. The fact is, there are various aspects of a text's meaning and different types of exegesis can address these different aspects. For this reason, the exegete can never hope to present *the exegesis* of a passage as if it were the final word. Rather, one does an exegesis of a passage in which a coherent, informed interpretation is presented, based on one's encounter with and investigation of a text at a given point in time.

To insist on the distinction between "understanding a text" and "establishing *the* meaning of a text" recognizes that an interpreter never fully comprehends a text, especially at one sitting or even at the end of an intensive investigation. This is the reason that exegesis is an ongoing process. It never ceases. Even if one has read a text dozens, even hundreds of times, there will always be dimensions of the text which may come to life in new ways or will be seen from new angles. Exegesis does not allow us to master the text so much as it enables us to enter it.

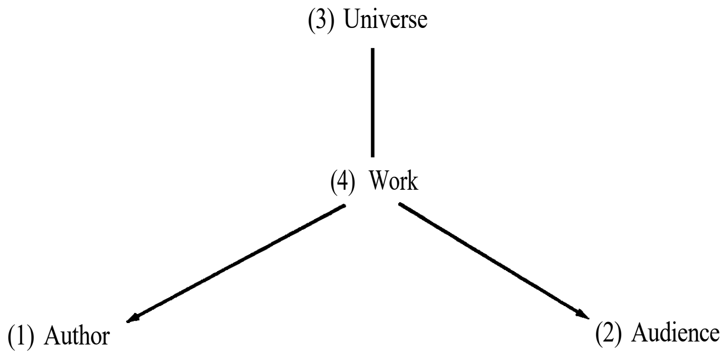
One way to think about the exegetical task is to conceive of it as learning to interrogate the text. To be sure, the interpreter may not always come to a text with a set of formulated questions, but as one reads a text questions do begin to emerge and intuitions take shape. Doing exegesis requires us to know, first of all, that there are different kinds of questions we can put to a text, and second, which kinds of questions to ask for different purposes. In other words, there are a number of approaches to the study of a text and a number of methods that can be employed to interrogate a text.

We can demonstrate the multiple aspects of exegesis by drawing on a parallel from the study of linguistics. Modem communication theory has developed what is called the "communication triangle" to illustrate the various factors involved in the communication process. The following is a very simplified version of this triangle:

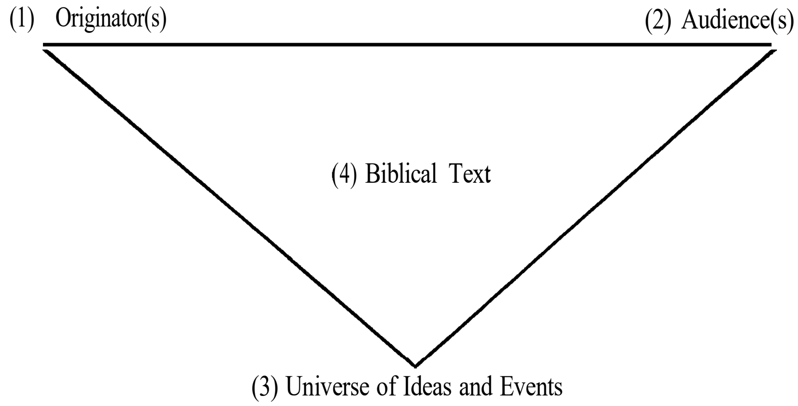


In this diagram the sender represents the speaker, writer, artist, or whoever is the originator of communication. The receiver is the audience, listener, hearer, reader, or whoever becomes part of the particular communication process. The world of reality denotes the universe of objects, ideas, and meanings, which are shared in some way by both the sender and receiver and make communication possible. The signal is the means of communication; for the artist it is the work, for a writer it is the text.

A similar schematic diagram constructed and widely used to illustrate the relationship of various literary-critical theories parallels the above communication triangle. This second diagram is as follows:

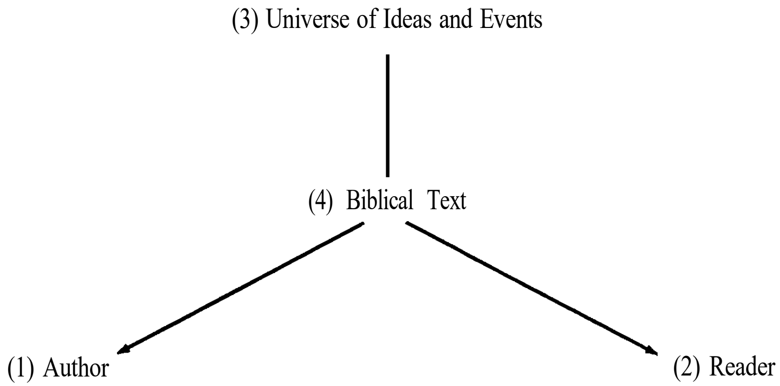


If we apply the first model to biblical interpretation, a resulting triangle would look like this:



The originator(s) of the biblical text may be an author(s), an editor(s), a redactor, or the community. The audience(s) may be the original or subsequent hearers or readers. The universe of ideas is the shared world of thoughts, perspectives, and understandings that make communication possible and are mirrored and embodied in the text. The text is the medium of communication that may have originally been oral in form but moved to and now encounters us in written form.

In terms of the second diagram above, the relationships in biblical interpretation may be diagrammed as follows:



The various issues and problems that confront the modern exegete of the text may be viewed in terms of whether the questions we ask focus on one or the other of the components of the model and whether we are concerned with the original or the subsequent components in the process. That is, we can interrogate the text in terms of the author's initial communication, the text's (hypothetical) original shape, the original audience's hearing, understanding, and reception of the communication, and so on. Or we may ask questions about later forms of the text, later audiences, and later understandings realizing we ourselves are now an audience, reading the text in an even later form (generally in translation, for example), and in the context of a universe of ideas that, at least superficially, may differ significantly from those shared by the original participants in the process or those held by subsequent participants in the life of the text.

We do well to remember that the various techniques of biblical criticism have been developed as interpreters have sought to answer particular kinds of questions and to solve particular kinds of problems. In the remainder of this book, we will be discussing the various ways of addressing the questions and problems modern students and interpreters encounter when exegeting the biblical text. The choice is not arbitrary. There is a broad consensus about the kinds of questions to ask, the problems to be encountered, and the methods to be employed. This consensus is the result of centuries of biblical interpretation. Debates still continue about the relative merits of certain types of questions, and they will continue, as they should. Nevertheless, genuine gains in our understanding of the Bible have been made through the use and application of these methods and we should not pretend that we know less than we do. Biblical science has made significant advances, just as has every other field of scientific inquiry. The variety of methods to be discussed merely attests to the richness and diversity of the biblical documents and these methods should be seen as complementary. No single way of approaching a text should be seen as exhausting the meaning of a passage, but rather as a way of dealing with particular facets of a passage.

Each of these approaches is treated as a type of "criticism." This is a technical expression used by scholars to denote a field of study which has developed fairly clearly defined principles and techniques. "Criticism" derives from the Greek word ***krinein***, meaning "to judge" or "to discern," and denotes the process through which discerning judgments are made. A literary critic is one who studies literary documents attempting to make intelligent and informed judgments about them. In the end, such judgments may be negative or positive, complimentary or uncomplimentary, but "criticism" per se is a neutral term. Biblical criticism, as a broad category, encompasses many sub-disciplines and a wide variety of interpretive activities which seek to make discerning judgments

about the Bible. As such, "being critical" need not mean "being destructive," nor "being constructive" for that matter.

Most of the questions and problems which arise when modem readers engage in exegesis may be classified under one or more of the types of criticism. When a reader discovers an alternative wording within a text and wonders what the orginal wording or what the earliest form of a particular reading might have been, these are the fundamental problems with which *textual criticism* deals. One must determine what the wording of the text to be exegeted is. For this reason, the task of textual criticism is often one of the issues an exegete encounters.

In addition to issues concerning the wording of the passage under consideration, another set of questions arises which has to do with the text's setting in time and space-that is, its historical, geographical, and cultural setting or the context of the original author(s) and audience(s). As noted earlier, if certain customs, events, places, and names are referred to in the text and these are unfamiliar to the reader, they will need to be clarified before understanding results. Not only do matters referred to in the text itself require such clarification, but the history and setting of the text as well. Determining the period, geographical locale, and authorship of the document can be equally important. Such questions as these fall under the rubric of *historical criticism.*

Grammatical criticism includes all attempts to answer questions pertaining to the language of the text. This includes both the words themselves, either alone or in phrases, as well as the way in which the words are put together or the syntax of the sentence or paragraph. Rules of grammar in effect at the time the passage was written may also need to be examined if it appears that meaning and understanding depend upon resolving grammatical issues.

Concern with the style, character, compositional techniques, and rhetorical patterns constitutes the field of *literary criticism.* (Frequently, in biblical studies, literary criticism has been too narrowly identified with source analysis, which comprises only one aspect of literary criticism.) Such matters as the location of a passage within larger literary units and how the passage functions within these larger units are often quite crucial in understanding and interpreting a text. Since most of the biblical documents were originally oral in form or else written to be read aloud and were intended to persuade a listening audience, ancient authors like ancient orators were ordinarily intentional and careful about how they put together and arranged their compositions. Thus the rhetorical features of a text must be given careful consideration.

If literary criticism deals with how the passage is structured and how it relates to its larger literary unit, *form* criticism is more narrowly concerned with the passage itself or with sub-units in a passage. Special attention is given to the literary form or genre of the passage, for example, whether it is a parable, a prophetic speech, a hymn, and so forth. Attention to these questions has arisen because of the recognition that form and meaning are directly related; one reads a poem one way, a piece of prose another. The Bible contains a rich diversity of literary forms and genres and many of these already existed prior to their actual appearance in the biblical text. For this reason, questions of the original setting of particular literary forms and genres are also crucial as one seeks to determine the "life situation" of a passage.

It is now widely recognized that the Bible, in many of its parts, resembles an anthology of sacred writings where revered stories, traditions, and sayings uttered by individuals and preserved by various communities have been collected, edited, and formed into a single text. This **means** that some texts have a "pre-history," by which is meant that they were actually spoken or written, preserved and transmitted much earlier than their incorporation into the biblical text itself. Efforts to uncover the earlier stages of development through which a text has passed are dealt with under *tradition criticism.*

Even though a text might have a pre-history, the reader finds it located within a specific biblical writing. Thus the interpreter will also want to ask how the author(s) or editor(s) intended a passage to be understood in its final literary form. *Reduction criticism* focuses on the final form of the passage and on the changes or redactions it may have undergone in the editorial process. It assesses the significance of these editorial changes and reshapings, which may have occurred in the various written stages prior to and including its final form.

The biblical text, like any other, may be read and interpreted purely as a text without regard to such historically oriented matters as the text's origins, the author's intention, and the original audience. Such an approach focuses on the structure and meaning of the text in light of universal concerns and factors, as these are encountered in and brought to the text by the reader. *Structural criticism,* as this approach is called, has recently been borrowed from general criticism and applied to biblical texts. Such criticism seeks to explain how meaning is structured into a text, to understand how a reader comprehends a text, and to discover how universal structures of thought open the text to the reader.

Over the centuries, the Bible has been and continues to be read as

sacred Scripture. As Scripture, the Bible, in varying forms, constitutes a canon for Jewish and Christian communities of faith. *Canonical criticism* explores how the Scriptures were transmitted and shaped by believing communities to produce a canon and how texts are to be read and understood as parts of a collection of sacred writings.

By arranging these various aspects of the exegetical process in this order, we do not mean to suggest that exegesis is a mechanical undertaking which one can accomplish in a stair-step order as if one method or stage of exegesis always leads to the next. Normally, questions may arise from the text in an unsystematic order, depending on the nature of the text. For example, an interpreter may be puzzled first by literary or historical features of a text and only later discover that an important textual variant within the passage needs to be clarified. Even though questions may arise from the text in a somewhat random fashion, they need not be pursued randomly. Instead, the interpreter will discover that fairly systematic ways of tackling various exegetical questions do exist and that they may be pursued to achieve good results.

Generally speaking, the exegetical task may be said to fall into two fairly clearly defined stages: analysis and synthesis. As the interpreter begins the task of exegesis, examining different aspects of the passage, whether they are historical, grammatical, literary, or whatever, will serve as a way of "breaking down" the passage into its component parts and problems and examining them as discrete units and issues. These separate analytic tasks will normally interlock for each will inform the other. As analysis takes place, the interpreter's understanding of the passage will gradually increase and the groundwork will be laid for synthesis. By synthesis, we mean the process by which the interpreter again "puts together" the text. Here, the task is to relate the preliminary analytical investigations to each other, weighing the significance of each, and deciding how they contribute to the overall interpretation.

As exegesis takes place, the interpreter will discover that exegesis has both a positive and negative function. Positively, the interpreter will be able to establish certain matters about the text that were previously unknown or uncertain, and as a result, the exegetical task produces new knowledge, at least for the interpreter. Negatively, the interpreter may succeed in determining only what the text cannot mean. Quite often, the most productive part of exegesis is uncovering "false understandings" or ways of looking at the text which do not conform to the evidence and insight discovered in an examination of the text through the exegetical process. To put it another way, the exegete may succeed only in drawing further limits around the passage or in narrowing the concentric circles of meaning and interpretation which have grown up around the text in the history of interpretation. Although this may cause the interpreter to become more modest, it is scarcely a negligible accomplishment.

In every case, the interpreter will soon discover that, although employing the tools, methods, and findings of well-developed disciplines, such as lexicography, textual criticism, and historical analysis, exegesis is nevertheless an art as well as a science. It requires both imagination and creativity, not only in learning how to put questions to a text, but also in learning how to answer them, and above all in synthesizing these answers into a coherent, meaningful interpretation of the passage. Contrary to popular opinion, however, one can learn to be an artist as well as a scientist.

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CHAPTER 2

TEXTUAL CRITICISM:

The Quest for the Original Wording

When studying a biblical text, the interpreter frequently encounters different wordings, or variant readings, for the same passage. This may be noticed when one reads the same passage in different translations. For example, reading the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian nobleman in Acts 8 in the King James Version, one notices the nobleman's confession given in verse 37. Reading the same account in the Revised Standard Version, one discovers that the confession is missing from the text. Instead, it is placed in a footnote and prefaced with the remark: "Other ancient authorities add all or most of verse 37."

Variant wordings of a passage may also be noticed if one is working with a single translation, particularly if it is an edition of one of the major committee translations of the Bible, such as the Revised Standard Version (RSV), The New English Bible (NEB), The Jerusalem Bible (JB), the New Jewish Version (NJV), The New International Version (NIV), or the New American Bible (NAB). Reading a passage in such a modern edition, the interpreter may be referred to a footnote and be met with a list of symbols and abbreviations. For example, in the RSV, in the text of Micah 1:5, one reads: "And what is the sin of the house[a] of Judah?" In the footnote indicated by, the supralinear "a," one reads: "Gk Tg Compare Syr: Heb what *are the high* **places.**" This indicates that the wording given in the translation is taken from the Greek translation (Gk) and the Targums (Tg; Aramaic translations) and is similar to what is found in the Syriac translation (Syr) although the Hebrew reads *what are the high places.* Or, in reading Genesis 10:5, the reader is referred to a note which says: "Compare verses 20, 31. Heb lacks *These are the sons of Japheth."* This footnote indicates that the added material does not appear in the Hebrew nor in any ancient translation but has been added by the translators on the