Old Testament Exegesis, Fourth Edition

A Handbook for Students and Pastors

Douglas Stuart

Exegesis and the Original Text

The purpose of this chapter is to help you get a better feel for the process of exegesis by providing illustrations of how certain parts of the process might work in various OT passages. A number of passages are used selectively here—in some instances more than one for a given exegesis step—in an effort to provide you with an exposure to the OT's rich diversity of material. Therefore you will not see a systematic exegetical coverage of any single passage; for examples of the latter, recent technical and exegetical commentaries such as the Word Biblical Commentary series or the Hermeneia series (see 4.12.4) will prove helpful, as will, occasionally, the exegesis articles in a journal such as *Interpretation* (4.12.2).

Those who cannot read Hebrew will still find the content of this chapter helpful and generally comprehensible. For those who know Hebrew, regular reference to *BHS* (or *BH*^{3} or *BHQ*) is essential for a sense of the full contexts from which this chapter's selections are taken.

For convenience, the divisions in this chapter correspond to those in chapter 1. Not every step should require an illustration, but wherever one might genuinely be helpful, at least one has been provided. Longer or multiple illustrations have been provided when it seemed that they might help to clarify the exegesis process.

2.1. Text

2.1.1. Confirming the limits of the passage

There are two places to which you can turn immediately for help in confirming proper limits for a passage: (1) the Hebrew text itself in *BHS* (or

*BH*³ or *BHQ*), and (2) virtually any modern translation. Examine their paragraphing. In the case of the Hebrew text, the biblical material is set off in paragraph form by means of right-margin indentation variation. When the margin location changes, either by going further into the middle of the page or by going further back out to the right edge, that is signaling the editor's opinion that logically a new section has begun. In the case of the modern English versions, simple indentation of the first word in a sentence indicates a new paragraph. By examining the arrangement of your passage, ideally in both Hebrew and English, you can quickly tell whether your own tentative identification of a passage conforms to scholars' judgments about the natural groupings of subject matter.

Decisions about paragraphing are sometimes subjective, and you will find that the various editors' groupings of content do not always agree. But if you decide to start your passage where no editor has begun a paragraph, or end your passage where no editor has ended a paragraph, then it is your responsibility to argue fully for your decision to select or configure the passage as you have done.

2.1.2. Comparing the versions

To analyze the contribution of the various ancient language versions of the OT for confirming or questioning the Hebrew text, you must in effect translate each one back into Hebrew at least to the extent that you can tell whether it reflects the MT or runs contrary to it. Since this process can be complicated, most people find it helpful, at least at first, to chart the versions one above another, line by line, so that your ability to compare readings is facilitated. Remember to compare the wording of the versions for the whole passage. If you try to consult the versions only when the MT seems problematic, you will miss all the variants resulting from MT corruptions that once were obvious but later were smoothed over and rewritten into readable Hebrew (but not necessarily the original Hebrew) by well-meaning scribes of old.

A word-by-word comparison in the case of 1 Samuel 20:32 (where the Qumran version happens to exist) would look something like the chart on the next page.

By writing out the Hebrew of the MT, then listing selected versions (including the LXX) directly underneath, according to the Semitic word order from right to left, you can easily see how the versions line up. In the chart, the parentheses are a convenient way to indicate that both the

Qumran text and the LXX omit any correspondence to the MT אליו, suggesting that this word might be an expansion (in this case, a simple explanatory addition) in the MT. However, the LXX also omits any correspondence to the MT and Qumran words אביו ויאמר. This perhaps reflects a haplography (a loss of something once present) in the Hebrew text that was used by the LXX translator. The Peshitta and Targum follow the MT, as they usually do. The Vulgate also follows the MT, as it typically does. (The Peshitta, Targum, and Vulgate are much less often truly "independent" witnesses to an original that differs from the MT than the LXX is. Even the Qumran scrolls, themselves Hebrew, will much more often reflect independence from the Hebrew MT than the Peshitta, Targum, or Vulgate will.)

In the chart we have included the English translation according to the Semitic word order. You may find it helpful to do this, at least as you begin learning the method. You may also wish to include the English translation under any spot where the versions contain a wording different from the MT, especially if you cannot translate the various versions at sight! Refer to Brotzman's *Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction* or Tov's *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* or McCarter's *Textual Criticism: Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (see 4.1.2) for examples and explanations of the principles involved in deciding which version best reflects the original.

1 Samuel 20:32

אָבִיו	אֶת שָׁאוּל	יְהוֹנָתָן	וַיַּעַן	*MT*
his father	Saul	Jonathan	And answered	
"	"	[first two words obliterated]		*Qumran*
( )	τῷ Σαουλ	Ιωναθαν	καὶ ἀπεκρίθη	*LXX*
"	" "	"	" "	*Syriac*
"	" "	"	" "	*Targum*
				Vulgate

עָשָׂה	מַה	יוּמַת	לָמֶּה	אֵלָיו	וַיֹּאמֶר
has he done?	What	must he die?	Why	to him	and said
"	"	"	"	( )	"
πεποίηκεν;	τί	ἀποθνῄσκει;	Ἵνα τί	( )	( )
"	"	"	" "	"	"
"	"	"	" "	"	"

2.1.3. Reconstructing and annotating the text

Two examples are given here to illustrate the process of reconstructing and annotating the text. Many times a passage will require no reconstruction at all. After you have compared the versions, you will decide that the passage as printed in the *BHS* or *BH³* or *BHQ* (all three contain the wording of the Leningrad Codex of AD 1008) adequately preserves the original. But when the ancient versions disagree significantly, you must try to determine how that disagreement might have arisen. Thus you must look for an original wording that would best account for the present divergent wordings. This means working backward from what is present in the various ancient versions to what theoretically must have been in the original text.

Hundreds of differences in translation among modern English versions of the OT are due simply to translators' reconstructions of the Hebrew text. No modern translation follows the *BHS/BH³/BHQ* Hebrew text slavishly. All translators will modify a text whenever they think that the evidence from the ancient versions points to an original Hebrew text different from that preserved in the Leningrad Codex. As a result, they are often translating into English from a reconstructed Hebrew text. Thus, if for no other reason than to understand why modern translators have done what they have done, you need to know something about how reconstructing a text works. The examples below should help.

Reconstructing two Hebrew names: Joshua 7:1

A careful comparison of the ancient versions confirms what the *BHS* textual footnotes 1a and 1b alert you to in abbreviated form. That is, the Hebrew (MT)

$$\text{עָכָן בֶּן־כַּרְמִי בֶּן־זַבְדִּי}$$

is possibly the result of a miscopy at some point in the long history of the transmission of the text of Joshua. For the name עָכָן (Achan) you find that a number of important Septuagint (Greek) texts, as well as the Syriac Peshitta, have the equivalent of עָכָר (Achar), which is the form this name has in the Hebrew text as well at 1 Chronicles 2:7. Moreover, the name of this person's grandfather, זַבְדִּי (Zabdi) in the Hebrew, is rendered in a number of important Septuagint texts as the equivalent of זִמְרִי (Zimri), which is also the form the name has in 1 Chronicles 2:6.

Which is correct: Achan grandson of Zabdi or Achar grandson of Zimri? Three considerations help you decide. First, you take the approach

that the Greek (LXX) evidence must be evaluated seriously. (See 4.1.3 for further comment on the value of the LXX relative to the MT.) It makes the choice at least a toss-up. In the instance of the first name, the addition of Syriac evidence adds even more weight. Second, you note that the comparative readings in Chronicles are very strong evidence for Achar and Zimri, respectively. Why? Because the Chronicler, writing long after the book of Joshua was complete, reflects an independent rendering of the names. We have no evidence to suggest that the Chronicler would alter a name, and plenty to suggest that his concern for accurate genealogies might preserve a name more precisely than even a copy of the book of Joshua would. Third, you see that the passage makes an issue of the mnemonic device, a pun, by which Israelites remembered the valley where Achan/Achar was stoned. They called it (Josh. 7:26) עֵמֶק עָכוֹר, "Trouble Valley," the word for "trouble" (עָכוֹר, Achor) having the same consonants as Achar, but not those of Achan.

You must then give this evidence and your reasoning (whether briefly or at length depends on the scope of your paper/project) for the originality of Achar and Zimri, in annotations to the text as you print it out. Using the bracket system recommended in chapter 1, you may make your reconstructed text look something like this:

$$\text{וַיִּקַּח עָכָ<ר> }^{a}\text{ בֶן־כַּרְמִי בֶן־זִ<מְר>}^{b\text{י}}$$

The superscript letters [a] and [b] will alert the reader to look for explanations of these reconstructions in your annotations.

Reconstructing a common term: 1 Samuel 8:16

Near the middle of the verse, the Hebrew (MT) reads:

וְאֶת־בַּחוּרֵיכֶם הַטּוֹבִים
and your fine/choice young men

A careful examination of the ancient versions reveals to you, however, that the Greek (LXX) at the same point in the verse has

τὰ βουκόλια ὑμῶν τὰ ἀγαθά
your fine/choice cattle

Which was the original—"cattle" or "young men" or neither—and how do you decide? First, following the most basic principle of text criticism

(as explained for you in any of the basic guides to text criticism listed in 4.1.2), you try to determine what original wording would, in the history of copying/miscopying the passage, have produced both "young men" in the Hebrew and "cattle" in the Greek. To do this you must translate the Greek back into Hebrew, because the original wording was not Greek but Hebrew. Here, by consulting Hatch and Redpath's *Concordance to the Septuagint* (see 4.4.2) or by using one of the computer concordances to trace Hebrew equivalents for Greek words (see 4.4.2) or by using Tov's text comparison concordance (see 4.4.2) you can find at once that βουκόλια is how the LXX frequently translated the Hebrew בָּקָר, "cattle."

Now, just two more steps. First, you compare בָּחוּר and בָּקָר. The words are the same except for the middle consonant, ח or ק. The *shureq* vowel (וּ), though written with *waw*, is only a vowel and represents a vocalization decision by copyists long after 1 Samuel was first written (cf., e.g., Cross and Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography* [4.3.2]). What original word would account for both בָּחוּר and בָּקָר? Your answer is בָּקָר, "cattle." The ח of בָּחוּר is probably the miscopy. Second, you confirm this decision by analyzing the immediate context. After "male slaves" and "female slaves" (a logical pair), "young men" and "donkeys" would hardly go together. But "cattle" and "donkeys," another logical pair, certainly would.

Finally, you summarize the evidence and your reasoning for your reader, at whatever length is appropriate to your paper. Your reconstructed text might look like this:

$$\text{וְאֶת־בְּ}\langle\text{בָּקָ}\rangle^a\text{רֵיכֶם הַטּוֹבִים}$$

The [a] would refer the reader to your annotation, that is, your summary of the textual evidence and explanation, in the footnotes or endnotes.

2.1.4. Putting your passage in versified form

To save space, the *BHS* (as did *BH³* and as will *BHQ*) arranges poetry so that an entire couplet (bicolon) or triplet (tricolon) appears on one printed line. But in an exegesis paper, it is usually better to list each part of a couplet or triplet on a line of its own. In this way the correspondences from line to line are much more evident.

Here is Numbers 23:8–9 versified in such a manner:

How can I curse   [8]מָה אֶקֹּב לֹא קַבֹּה אֵל
  whom God has not cursed?

And how can I denounce whom Yahweh has not denounced?	וּמָ֣ה אֶזְעֹ֔ם לֹ֥א זָעַ֖ם יְהוָֽה
[9] For from the tops of the mountains I see him,	כִּֽי־מֵרֹ֤אשׁ צֻרִים֙ אֶרְאֶ֔נּוּ
And from the hills I view him.	וּמִגְּבָע֖וֹת אֲשׁוּרֶ֑נּוּ
Look, the people dwells alone	הֶן־עָם֙ לְבָדָ֣ד יִשְׁכֹּ֔ן
And among the nations does not consider itself.	וּבַגּוֹיִ֖ם לֹ֥א יִתְחַשָּֽׁב

From such an arrangement it is much easier to see that the couplet in verse 8 is a simple word-for-word synonymous parallelism, while the couplets in verse 9 represent more complicated synonymous parallelisms.

By the way, unless you actually intend to analyze the Masoretes' medieval chanting system or count their (chanting) accents as a rough way of analyzing the meter of a poem (see the Masorah introductions by Kelley et al. or Ginsburg in 4.1.2 for help in doing this if it is what you wish to do), there is no point in including the accent marks in your own written text.

2.2. Translation

The purpose of the following illustrations is to encourage you to produce your own translation of a passage rather than simply relying on translations found in major modern versions. These brief examples all involve relatively simple Hebrew wordings, which nevertheless have not always been translated clearly or even properly.

What right have you to disagree with translations produced by "experts"? You have every right! Consider the facts: All the modern translations (and all the ancient ones for that matter) have been produced either by committees working against time deadlines or by individuals who cannot possibly know the whole Bible so well in the original that they produce flawless renderings at every point. Moreover, in the modern business of Bible publishing, the more "different" a translation is, the more risk there is that it will not sell. Thus there is a pressure on translators, committees, publishers, and others responsible to keep renderings conservative in meaning, even though, happily, usually up-to-date in idiomatic language. Finally, most people hate to go out on a limb with a translation in print. Many translation problems are matters of ambiguity: there is more than one way to construe the original. But space limitations do not permit translators to offer an explanation every time they might wish to

render something from the original in a truly new way. So they almost always err on the side of caution. As a result, all modern translations tend, albeit with perfectly good intentions, to be overly "safe" and traditional. In the working of a translation committee, the lone genius is usually outvoted by the cautious majority.

Therefore, every so often you might actually produce a better translation than others have done because you can invest much more time exegeting your passage than the individuals or committees were able to afford because of the speed at which they were required to work. Besides, you are choosing a translation suitable for your particular reader(s) rather than for the whole English-speaking world. Remember: A word does not so much have an individual meaning as a *range of meanings*. Choosing from that range of meanings is often subjective and should be something you do for the benefit of your audience, rather than something you leave entirely to others who have no knowledge of your audience and must translate strictly for the masses. Fortunately, in an exegesis paper/project you can explain briefly to your reader, in the annotations to your translation, the options you had to choose from and your reason(s) for choosing the particular English word that you did. Those who worked on the various ancient or modern versions did not have such an opportunity.

2.2.1. *A translation that clarifies a prophet's behavior: Jonah 1:2*

וּקְרָא עָלֶיהָ כִּי־עָלְתָה רָעָתָם לְפָנָי

The usual translation of the last part of the verse is something like this: "Proclaim against it because its evil has come up before me." This translation, however, has always been problematic. It represents only one way of rendering some Hebrew words that have extensive ranges of meaning, and it does not fit easily the point of the overall story. After all, this is a command that Jonah tries to disobey by refusing to go to Nineveh. Yet as typically translated, it sounds like a command Jonah would love to obey. Why would he not be glad to preach against a city that God has declared to be *evil*—a city occupied by the enemies of his people?

In 1.2.1 you are advised to "start fresh, from the beginning." Following that advice, and determined not to accept the usual translation as the only reasonable option just because it is the usual one, you consider the meaning of the Hebrew words afresh by looking at their definitions in a good up-to-date lexicon such as Holladay or Koehler-Baumgartner (4.8.1). Here is what you find: עַל can mean "against" but also "concern-

ing." כִּי can mean "because" but also "that." רָעָה can mean "evil" but more commonly means "trouble." And עָלְתָה . . . לְפָנַי is best translated idiomatically not "come . . . before me" but "come . . . to my attention." Eventually you conclude that the whole clause can very well mean "proclaim concerning it that their trouble has come to my attention."

The exegetical implications are significant. In contrast to the usual translation, your translation makes it clear why the hypernationalist Jonah fled from his assignment: God was sending him on a mission of concern, not a mission of denunciation. A careful reading of the rest of the book confirms this repeatedly (cf. esp. Jonah 4).

2.2.2. *A modest, noninterpretive translation: Proverbs 22:6*

חֲנֹךְ לַנַּעַר עַל־פִּי דַרְכּוֹ
גַּם כִּי־יַזְקִין לֹא־יָסוּר מִמֶּנָּה

This verse is usually translated about as follows: "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." But when you closely analyze the words' meaning ranges, you find no Hebrew equivalent for the English "should." This piques your interest. After all, the usual translation seems to promise quite a lot. Indeed, this rather popular verse has often been cited in support of the notion that parents can virtually guarantee that their children will turn out to be godly adults if raised properly. Most proverbs are of course generalizations, and generalizations have their exceptions. But you still have every right to "start fresh" in your own translation of this proverb, no matter how well known it may be. (Remember: The better known a wording in the Bible is, the more hesitant modern professional translators are to depart from it, even when they dislike it, for fear that people will not buy a Bible that has changed the wording of one of their "favorite verses.")

The process of translating afresh is not terribly complicated. It requires mainly a willingness to consider combinations of meanings slowly and carefully. Thus with regard to Proverbs 22:6, what you can easily determine by patiently consulting a lexicon is that עַל־פִּי means "according to" and that דֶּרֶךְ means simply "way," so that דַרְכּוֹ means either "his way" or "his own way." The first half of this poetic couplet actually says, then, "Train a child according to his (own) way." You still find nothing about "should" here. The real point of the verse, you rightly conclude, is that a child who is allowed selfishly to do what the child wants when young will have the same selfish tendencies as an adult.

Note: Excellent sources of alternative translations are the authors' translations in technical commentaries. A scholar who has studied a book intensively is usually best equipped to offer a nuanced translation. And for late-breaking information on more precise meanings of individual Hebrew words, check the annual listing of words discussed in such databases as *Old Testament Abstracts* (4.12.1), via either its book format or its computerized format.

2.3. Grammatical Data

Here is where all those hours spent learning your Hebrew grammar can finally pay off. The goal of grammar is accuracy. In any language, bad grammar may offend our tastes, but its greater danger is that it may block our comprehension. In the exegesis process, a failure to appreciate the grammar in an OT passage is not simply a failure to observe niceties of speech; it is a failure to be sure that you know exactly what was or was not said.

2.3.1. Identifying grammatical ambiguity: Judges 19:25

וַיַּחֲזֵק הָאִישׁ בְּפִילַגְשׁוֹ וַיֹּצֵא אֲלֵיהֶם
So the man seized his concubine, and brought her out to them.

Exegeting Judges 19, you become aware of a puzzling apparent inconsistency. The Levite seems rather inconsiderate (v. 28) of what he has put his concubine through in giving her over to a gang of rapists (vv. 22–25), and yet later he seems so furious at what they (predictably) have done to her that he calls all Israel to war over the matter (vv. 29–30; chap. 20). Carefully, with an eye toward precise grammar, you reread the relevant portions to determine if your initial impression has been accurate. Your special interest is in understanding exactly who the parties involved in verse 25 were.

You note that each of the characters in the story is referred to in more than one way. Specifically, the Levite is referred to as אִישׁ לֵוִי ("Levite," v. 1); אִישָׁהּ ("her husband," v. 3); חֲתָנוֹ ("his son-in-law," vv. 5, 9); and הָאִישׁ ("the man," vv. 7, 9, 17, 22, 28, etc.). The Ephraimite man in whose house he stayed at Gibeah is called אִישׁ זָקֵן ("an old man," v. 16); הָאִישׁ ("the man," vv. 16, 22, 23, 26); and הָאִישׁ הַזָּקֵן ("the old man," vv. 17, 20, etc.). You see from a quick comparison that either the Levite or the old man can be referred to as simply הָאִישׁ (the man). Who then is the actual