

# NEW TESTAMENT TOOLS AND STUDIES

EDITED BY

BRUCE M. METZGER, PH.D., D.D., L.H.D., D. THEOL., D. LITT.

Professor of New Testament Language and Literature, Emeritus  
Princeton Theological Seminary  
and

Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy

AND

BART D. EHRMAN, PH.D.

Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

VOLUME XXV



Notice: This material may be  
protected by copyright law  
(Title 17 U.S. Code).

# HANDBOOK TO EXEGESIS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

EDITED BY

STANLEY E. PORTER

Notice: This material may be protected  
by the copyright law (Title 17 USC).



BRILL  
LEIDEN · NEW YORK · KÖLN  
1997

# WHAT IS EXEGESIS? AN ANALYSIS OF VARIOUS DEFINITIONS

STANLEY E. PORTER AND KENT D. CLARKE

## INTRODUCTION

It is an unseasonably beautiful day in June and a student, wanting much more to be out kicking a football—or anywhere other than where he is—enters to write a final examination paper in biblical studies. With some anxiety he sits down and at the proper moment flings open the exam paper and stares intently at the first question. It innocently reads: 'Biblical Passages: Exegete\* fully the prologue to John's Gospel (1:1-18). Remember to make your answer clear and well-organized, showing a coherent train of thought and referring to major scholars and their opinions.' A wry smile crosses our unlikely hero's face, as he remembers several lectures on the prologue, as well as a number of other articles and books he has perused, for he actually knows something about this passage. He begins to formulate an answer. Perhaps the best place to start is with an analysis of the term *λόγος*. He remembers the lengthy and insightful section in Raymond Brown's commentary on the Jewish background to the concept of 'the Word'.<sup>1</sup> Since Christianity is often considered to be a Jewish sect, closely tied to the Old Testament, this might be the best way to proceed. Besides, it would certainly fill a few pages. But wait. There is also the work of C.H. Dodd on the Greek philosophical background to the concept of 'the Word'.<sup>2</sup> That might be the best way to approach the answer, since the Gospel of John was originally written in Greek, takes notice of other Greek elements in Jesus' ministry, and reflects a religious group that was spread throughout the Greco-Roman world. Then again, perhaps he should answer as do Hoskyns and Davey in their commentary on John, laying out the evidence for both sides.<sup>3</sup> But

\* Use of "exegete" as a verb is now common on examination papers.

<sup>1</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (2 vols.; AB, 29, 29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 519-24.

<sup>2</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), pp. 263-85.

<sup>3</sup> E. Hoskyns and F.N. Davey, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1947), pp. 154-63.

that commentary was, at least in his opinion, a disappointment, for the very reason that it did not make up its mind. A sense of unease comes over our studious friend as small beads of sweat begin to form on his brow and upper lip, and he begins to twist nervously in his seat. 'But this is just background material anyway', he thinks. One of his and other students' most frequent complaints is that the lecturers spend so much time talking about the material behind the text that they never get to the text itself. Perhaps another tack will provide the answer. In a more recent article, Frank Kermode, the literary scholar, picks up long-heard rumblings about the use of the verb 'was' and pursues this as the unifying thread to John's prologue, weaving together various narrative intrusions.<sup>4</sup> But how, our now panicking examinee thinks, does this square with Eugene Nida's structural analysis of John 1:1-5, which uses instead of the verb 'was' a series of repetitions in chiasmic order as pivotal points for analysis?<sup>5</sup> Both of these promise interesting answers, but then, hadn't he heard one of the lecturers make the comment that all this new literary stuff was no substitution for exegesis? Glancing at his watch to see how much time he has lost, our now depressed student moves on to the second question: 'Reconstruct the historical background of 1 Corinthians...' and breathes a sigh of relief.

#### EXEGESIS DEFINED

##### *Broader Definition and Synonyms*

Exegesis comprises the most important task of the study of the New Testament (Conzelmann and Lindemann 1988: 1). At the same time, there are few terms in biblical studies like 'exegesis' that are used so freely and represent so many different things to various scholars and students. Thus the plight of our industrious student above. Part of the term's perceived ambiguity may reside in its often synonymous relationship to a number of other words such as 'interpretation' and 'hermeneutics'. Broadly speaking, all three terms fall under the discipline of 'heuristics' (Greek *εὕρισκω* which not only meant 'find' or 'come upon', but could also refer to an intellectual discovery based upon reflection, observation, examination, or investigation), that is, the study and development of methods or principles that aid one in

<sup>4</sup> F. Kermode, 'St John as Poet', *JSNT* 28 (1986), pp. 3-16.

<sup>5</sup> E.A. Nida et al., *Style and Discourse* (New York: Bible Society, 1983), pp. 112-16.

discovering the sense and meaning of a text.

Hermeneutics (Greek *ἑρμηνεύω* which meant to translate, explain, interpret, or even proclaim) can be widely defined as the attempt to understand anything that somebody else has said or written (Marshall 1979: 11). And, although hermeneutics has classically referred to the science of formulating guidelines, laws, and methods for interpreting an original author's meaning, more recently, the term has been more narrowly restricted to the elucidation of a text's meaning for a contemporary audience. Anthony Thiselton clarifies this point:

Traditionally hermeneutics entailed the formulation of rules for the understanding of an ancient text, especially in linguistic and historical terms. The interpreter was urged to begin with the language of the text, including its grammar, vocabulary, and style. He examined its linguistic, literary, and historical context. In other words, traditional hermeneutics began with the recognition that a text was conditioned by a given historical context. However, hermeneutics in the more recent sense of the term begins with the recognition that historical conditioning is two-sided: *the modern interpreter, no less than the text, stands in a given historical context and tradition* (Thiselton 1980: 11).<sup>6</sup>

The term exegesis, like hermeneutics, has also been broadly defined as a normal activity in which all of us are engaged from day to day. Hayes and Holladay explain that 'Whenever we hear an oral statement or read a written one and seek to understand what has been said, we are engaging in exegesis' (Hayes and Holladay 1987: 5). The word exegesis itself is derived from the Greek term *ἐξηγέομαι*, which literally meant 'lead out of'. When applied to written texts the word referred to the 'reading out' of the text's meaning. More generally, exegesis also meant to explain, interpret, tell, report, or describe. And, once again like hermeneutics, exegesis classically referred to the articulation or discovery of a text's meaning based on the understanding of the original author's intentions and goals.

Lastly, the word interpretation (Latin *interpretari* which meant to explain, translate, or understand) is often used interchangeably with the words hermeneutics and exegesis. Such is the case with Gerhard Ebeling who asserts that these three terms are in fact synonyms. Ebeling adds further that 'the words "interpretation" and "hermeneutics" at bottom mean the same', and later goes on to say, 'Hermeneutics therefore, in order to be an aid to interpretation, must

<sup>6</sup> For similar definitions of the term hermeneutics, see Fee 1993: 27; and Osborne 1991: 5.

itself be interpretation' (Ebeling 1963: 321). C.F. Evans takes a similar stance when he states that hermeneutics 'is only another word for exegesis or interpretation'.<sup>7</sup>

Given the close resemblance in meaning of these three terms, it is not surprising that the word exegesis is so diversely applied or that its technical meaning is so difficult to establish. There are, however, a number of helpful distinctions that can be made in order to bring at least some clarification to our discussion and definition of the exegetical task. To begin with, the term interpretation is often used in a less technical and more general sense than either of the words exegesis or hermeneutics. Whereas the objects of interpretation can be various forms of oral, gestural, symbolic, and written communication, the object of exegesis and hermeneutics is more often equated with written data. One might say that interpretation, being the broadest of the three terms, incorporates both hermeneutics and exegesis as sub-categories (see Morgan and Barton 1988: 1-5; and Thiselton 1980: 10). Continuing to work from general to specific, the next term to follow is hermeneutics, which refers to the over-arching theories or philosophies that guide exegesis. And finally, exegesis, the most specific of the three terms, refers to the actual practice, procedures, and methods one uses to understand a text (see Osborne 1991: 5). Exegesis is concerned with the actual interpretation and understanding of the text, whereas hermeneutics is concerned with the nature of the interpretative process and the conditions to which basic understanding is to be subjected (Conzelmann and Lindemann 1988: 1). Exegesis concludes by saying, 'This passage means such and such'; hermeneutics ends by saying, 'This interpretative process is constituted by the following techniques and pre-understandings' (Carson 1984: 22-23).

#### *Traditional Definition*

As briefly mentioned, exegesis has been traditionally defined as the process by which a reader seeks to discover the meaning of a text *via* an understanding of the original author's intentions in that text. The classic goal of exegesis has been to articulate the meaning of a passage as the original writer intended it to be understood by his or her contemporary audience. Thus R.T. France (Marshall 1979: 252) understands exegesis as 'the discovery of what the text means in itself,

<sup>7</sup> C.F. Evans, *Is 'Holy Scripture' Christian?* (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 31.

that is, the original intention of the writer, and the meaning the passage would have held for the readers for whom it was first intended'. R.P. Martin similarly asserts that 'to 'practice exegesis in regard to the New Testament literature is to enquire what was the meaning intended by the original authors... This is to be the interpreter's primary aim, requiring that his approach to Scripture be one of honest enquiry and a determined effort to find out the intended meaning of the author for his day' (Marshall 1979: 220). And finally, like France and Martin, G.D. Fee explains in his handbook to New Testament exegesis,

The term 'exegesis' is used...in a consciously limited sense to refer to the historical investigation into the meaning of the biblical text. Exegesis, therefore, answers the question, What *did* the biblical author *mean*? It has to do both with *what* he said (the content itself) and why he said it at any given point (the literary context). Furthermore, exegesis is primarily concerned with intentionality: What did the author *intend* his original readers to understand? (Fee 1993: 27).

Exegesis of this nature has often been called 'grammatico-historical exegesis', or simply 'historical exegesis'. More technically, exegesis that concerns itself solely with historical background, the original author's intentions, and the ancient audience's understanding of these intentions has been termed 'exegesis proper'. The underlying hermeneutical philosophies of grammatico-historical exegesis began to be formulated as early as 1788 by the Leipzig theologian Karl Keil. Keil explained that, to interpret an author meant nothing more than to teach what meaning he intended to convey, or to assure that, when reading a work, the interpreter would think the same things as the author initially conceived. Interpreters were not to concern themselves about the nature of what the original author wrote—whether the words were true or false—but only to understand what was spoken by that author. Keil believed that the function of the interpreter closely resembled that of the historian, for just as the historian seeks to unbiasedly determine what has been done by another, without casting judgment on that event, so too the interpreter must concentrate attention on the author in order that he or she may know and explain to others what was earlier said and written by someone else. That the interpreter differentiates between sacred or profane writers Keil thought was inappropriate, since the writers of Scripture were to be understood in no other way than as human authors. For Keil it was the task of the theologian to consider what value was to be ascribed to the

opinions expounded by the sacred writers, what authority was to be attributed to them in the present age, and in what manner they were to be contemporized. In the words of Keil, however, the task of the exegete consisted only in making plain what was handed down by the biblical authors: 'In the case of a sacred no less than a profane author it is the task of the interpreter to bring to light what the author himself thought as he wrote, what meaning is suggested by his own discourse, and what he wished his readers to understand' (Kümmel 1973: 108-109). Grammatico-historical exegesis of this fashion required that a single and definite sense be assigned by the interpreter to the author's words and sentences.

In 1799, soon after Keil wrote, standing on the presupposition that the biblical authors were to be explained just as the profane, without taking the divine revelation of the Scriptures into consideration, and emphasizing a more literal interpretation, G.L. Bauer wrote:

The only valid principle of interpretation, whether the author be profane or biblical, is this: Every book must be explained in accordance with the linguistic peculiarities that characterize it; this means grammatical interpretation and results in a literal understanding of the text; and the presentation and clarification of the ideas that appear in it, ideas dependent on the customs and the way of thinking of the author himself and of his age, his nation, sect, religion, and so forth, is the task of what is called historical interpretation (Kümmel 1973: 112).

Further separation of the theological from the historical within exegesis can be clearly seen in individuals like Heinrich Meyer, who, in 1829, wrote in his *Critical and Exegetical Commentary* on the New Testament:

The area of dogmatics and philosophy is to remain off limits for a commentary. For to ascertain the meaning the author intended to convey by his words, impartially and historico-grammatically—that is the duty of the exegete. How the meaning so ascertained stands in relation to the teachings of philosophy, to what extent it agrees with the dogmas of the church or with the views of its theologians, in what way the dogmatician is to make use of it in the interest of his science—to the exegete as an exegete, all that is a matter of no concern (Kümmel 1973: 111).

Although in recent years many of the more radical maxims of grammatico-historical exegesis have been tempered—or at least advocates of the approach have been more willing to admit that a number of larger hermeneutical questions cannot be so easily answered by the method—there remain numerous biblical scholars

who wish to preserve the stringent historicity and a-theological stance that grammatico-historical exegesis has promoted. As we shall see below, however, there are a number of difficulties with many of the planks of this interpretative model.

#### *Traditional Definition Questioned*

Whereas the emphasis of grammatico-historical exegesis has focused upon what the biblical text originally *meant*, it has been more recently argued that the exegetical task should, and even must, be expanded to include both what the text *has meant* (i.e. its history of interpretation) and what the text *means* (i.e. its relevance for today). Individuals like Werner Stenger divide exegesis into three sub-disciplines: (1) those methods that seek to describe a text's *linguistic form* and underlying structures, (2) those methods that look into the circumstances surrounding a text's *origin* and seek to identify its original addressees, and (3) those methods that investigate the *reception* a text has had in the course of its history and still has in the present. Stenger's close proximity to traditional grammatico-historical exegesis, however, cannot be missed as he claims that

...this third group of methods—when the text in question is the New Testament—is the task of every theological discipline, including ethics. Therefore, we must understand the specific discipline of *New Testament* exegesis as obligated in particular to describe the text's linguistic form and investigate the circumstances of its origin. New Testament exegesis is thus directed primarily toward *philological* and *historical* goals, and within this dual focus is called *historical-critical* exegesis (Stenger 1993: 3).

Others, like W.G. Kümmel, still indebted to grammatico-historical exegesis, seem more willing to allow for a balance of interests within the exegetical task. Kümmel emphasizes that New Testament exegetes must keep in mind which of two possible ways of asking questions they will use in dealing with a particular exegetical problem. First, one may intend to learn from the text what it says about the historical circumstances at the time of its composition, its author, the readers for whom it was intended, the intellectual milieu from which it originated, and the external or internal history of primitive Christianity. Secondly, one may intend to discover the objective meaning of the text, that is, to learn from the text what it says about the subject matter discussed in it, and what this means for the interpreter personally (Kaiser and Kümmel 1981: 43-44). Like Kümmel, Dieter Lührmann sees exegesis as the attempt to answer two different questions: 'What is in the text?', and 'What does the text tell me?' (Lührmann 1989: 17).

*Alternative Methods of Exegesis*

Rather than merely tinkering with the historically-grounded grammatico-historical method, a number of recent biblical interpreters have claimed to overthrow its major assumptions. They have rejected many of its historically-based presuppositions, and have chosen to emphasize other exegetical criteria. We are grouping these exegetical methods together in this programmatic opening chapter, but they are in fact quite diverse, developing in some instances out of reaction to traditional exegesis and in others out of other intellectual disciplines. As a result, several of them have warranted their own separate chapters in this volume, where more comprehensive discussion can take place. The alternative forms of exegesis represented here include discourse analysis, a form of exegesis dependent upon many of the valuable insights of modern linguistics; rhetorical and narratological criticism, with its historical roots in a historically-grounded criticism, but much of its current practice relying upon modern literary conceptions; literary criticism, which remains a tremendously wide and diverse field; ideological criticisms, including such things as liberation and gender-based criticism; social-scientific criticism, taking its cue directly from recent work in the social sciences; and canonical criticism, directly reflecting concerns with the canon not so much in its historical dimensions but as an artifact of the Church. Only a few volumes on exegesis include discussion of these topics (see Hayes and Holladay 1987: 73-82, 110-30), although we suspect that future treatment of the subject of exegesis will need to address directly how these alternative forms of criticism have in fact become part of the mainstream (see Porter and Tombs 1995).

These criticisms deserve to have their place in the mainstream, rather than remaining on the periphery, where they are often viewed as an added extra to interesting exegesis by practitioners of more traditional methods (see Watson 1993). As the following discussion makes clear, there are a number of problem areas in traditional exegesis that these alternative forms of criticism have already or definitionally addressed, and from which traditional exegesis could rightly learn much. For example, literary criticism, as it has been appropriated for New Testament criticism, places exegetical emphasis not on historical origins, but on the final form of the text, attempting to overcome the problem of historical distance through definition.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in*

Canonical criticism faces the reality that so little is known about such basic questions as the authorship of even New Testament books, and relies upon the canonical status of these books as its most important interpretative and exegetical context.<sup>9</sup>

## ISSUES AND DIFFICULTIES ARISING OUT OF EXEGESIS

Already one can glimpse some of the issues and difficulties inherent to a discussion of the exegetical task. Clearly, reading and understanding the biblical text differs in degree and complexity from how one would read a personal letter from a close friend, the morning newspaper, or the most recent novel to appear on the book stand. A number of the major reasons for this difference in exegetical approach are briefly mentioned below.<sup>10</sup>

*The Problem of History*

By widening the exegetical task to include both what the text meant in the past and what it means in the present, one introduces a complicated dialectic that is difficult to map out. Related to this is the distinction between 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' exegetical approaches.<sup>11</sup> The goal of the former is to describe a text on the basis of its coherence, structure, and function as it exists in its final form. The goal of the latter is to explain the historical events and processes that brought the text to this form. Exegesis that seeks to answer what the text *means* at present is usually based upon the synchronic

*Western Literature* (trans. W.R. Trask; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, B.S. Childs's canonical approach in *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979); and *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994 [1984]).

<sup>10</sup> Concerning biblical interpretation, Thiselton groups the majority of hermeneutical and exegetical difficulties into three helpful categories, including (1) the problem of historical distance between ourselves and the biblical writers, (2) problems concerning the role of theology in interpretation, and (3) problems in the relationship between hermeneutics and language (Thiselton 1980: xi, xix).

<sup>11</sup> These words draw on the terminology of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) who is generally regarded as the father of modern linguistics. See Part 2 and Part 3 of his *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. R. Harris; London: Duckworth, 1983), pp. 99-187. The most reliable and complete edition is that by R. Engler, *Édition critique du 'Cours de linguistique générale' de F. de Saussure* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1967).

condition of the text, that is, *what it is*. On the other hand, exegesis that concerns itself with what the text *meant* relies more heavily upon the diachronic condition of the text, that is, *how it came to be what it is* (Stenger 1993: 26).<sup>12</sup>

The difficulty in bridging this gap exists for a number of reasons. First, the New Testament was not originally written in or to modern society. Instead, it was addressed to specific ancient audiences such as, in the case of Luke–Acts, the individual designated Theophilus; and in the case of the Pauline letters, churches such as those in Galatia, Philippi, and Thessalonica, and individuals such as Philemon, and perhaps Timothy and Titus. Hayes and Holladay rightly state, ‘as students interpreting biblical materials we are, in a sense, third-party intruders and suffer from third-party perspectives’ (Hayes and Holladay 1987: 15).

Secondly, the original biblical manuscripts were composed in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—all languages very different from contemporary English. Therefore, anyone who comes to the biblical text as an exegete must either rely upon second-hand translations (which are in a very real sense already interpretations) or, ideally, spend the necessary time and effort to learn these ancient languages. Even so, because these ancient languages are no longer spoken or written as they were in biblical times, they become impossible to fully master as a native speaker.

Thirdly, there is an enormous historical separation of almost two-thousand years between the New Testament authors and addressees and our present day. Although this historical distance frees the biblical texts from arbitrary interpretations and allows them to speak with their own voice, it can also prevent them from being relevant for us. Since they are objects from the past, these texts are often made to speak only to the past; therefore, they can fall silent when confronted with modern questions (Stenger 1993: 5). This separation may also result in ambiguity regarding the aims, goals, and intentions of the biblical writers and their audiences. In light of this, some even question the legitimacy of beginning exegesis with the study of the original author’s intent:

<sup>12</sup> Stenger makes the interesting point that ‘The sequence of synchronic and diachronic modes of observation is not arbitrary: *Before* the question of *how the text has come to be* (diachronic study) stands the question of *what it is* at a given point in time (synchronic study)’ (Stenger 1993: 26 and n. 4).

Modern critics increasingly deny the very possibility of discovering the original, or intended, meaning of a text. The problem is that while the original authors had a definite meaning in mind when they wrote, that is now lost to us because they are no longer present to clarify and explain what they wrote. The modern reader cannot study the text from the ancient perspective but constantly reads into that passage modern perspectives. Therefore, critics argue, objective interpretation is impossible and the author’s intended meaning is forever lost to us (Osborne 1991: 7).

Fourthly, not only is there an immense historical gap, but this historical gap is further compounded by the huge cultural gap that exists between the New Testament writers and modern day readers, particularly those in western society. Customs and manners, medicine and technology, human rights, legal codes, and world and cosmological views—just to name a few broad cultural constructs—are considerably different.

Fifthly, the growth and expansion of biblical traditions, the work of later biblical editors, and the emergence of textual accretions add to the dilemma. It is well argued that pericopes such as the Markan resurrection narrative (Mark 16:9-20) and the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11) are later expansions of the biblical tradition, which appeared after the original works of the particular author. Therefore, it becomes even more difficult to speak of the intentions of the original writers, and this subsequently serves to further complicate attempts at traversing the chasm that exists between what a biblical text meant in its original setting and what it means today. Adding to this, the oldest biblical manuscripts that we have are copies made quite some time after the original documents were written. Of the more than 5000 New Testament biblical manuscripts in our possession (none of which are identical), the earliest, a small papyrus fragment containing John 18:31-33 and John 18:37-38, dates to c. 125 CE. The earliest complete manuscript of the New Testament, Codex Sinaiticus, dates only to the fourth century CE.

#### *The Problem of Presuppositions*

While Lührmann explains that the basic problem of exegesis can be framed within two questions, ‘What happened?’ and ‘What must I do?’, he adds that one’s approach to these questions is shaped by the traditions from which one comes and in which one has learned to read the biblical texts, and also by the discussion of these traditions and the role which the texts play, depending on whether they are felt to be threatening or liberating. He is correct in saying that this is above all

connected with the question of the status of the biblical texts—whether they are understood as a primary orientation for life; as legitimation of one's own, a group's, one's parents, one's community's, or one's church's ways of life, all of which are open to criticism; as part of the condition of the world in which we live; or any other possibilities one might think of (Lührmann 1989: 17-18). In making these statements, Lührmann introduces another of the difficult issues arising out of exegesis, that of the exegete's presuppositions.

Grammatico-historical exegesis has often been promoted as a method of superlative objectivity. Grammatico-historical exegetes have promoted the idea that they approach the biblical text without any prior understanding of its meaning. The mind of the interpreter is to be a 'blank tablet' (*tabula rasa*), in order that the true and genuine sense of Scripture can show through. The theory is that, by placing themselves into the context, setting, and world of the ancient authors and readers, biblical exegetes are able to view the text from the original perspective, while at the same time suppressing any modern opinions or biases that might affect their interpretation.

Desirability aside, is this type of objective exegesis attainable? In his famous essay, 'Is Interpretation without Presuppositions Possible?', Rudolf Bultmann tackles this complex question. On the one hand, he asserts that exegesis without presuppositions is not only possible but demanded if 'without presuppositions' means 'without presupposing the results of exegesis'. In other words, exegesis must be without prejudice. On the other hand, Bultmann emphasizes that

*no exegesis is without presuppositions, inasmuch as the exegete is not a tabula rasa, but on the contrary, approaches the text with specific questions or with a specific way of raising questions and thus has a certain idea of the subject matter with which the text is concerned (Bultmann 1960: 289).*

The biblical text cannot be read from a neutral stance, regardless of how desirous the exegete is to accomplish this goal. Not only is every exegete determined by his or her own individuality, special biases, habits, gifts and weaknesses, but, in reading a text, the interpreter must formulate an initial understanding of what the text is saying. This must then be verified by the text itself. The reader must have at least some initial idea of or point of reference to the text and what the author is talking about before understanding can take place. Bultmann hastens to add that the historical method of exegesis in itself has several presuppositions, including the presupposition that

history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect... This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers and that therefore there is no 'miracle' in this sense of the word. Such a miracle would be an event whose cause did not lie within history (Bultmann 1960: 291-92).

Rather than deny one's presuppositions in the struggle to attain the facade of ideal objectivity in exegesis, the interpreter must, in the words of Conzelmann and Lindemann,

ask (or be asked) about the presuppositions he brings to the text. What tradition is in his background? What questions does he expect the text to answer? Why indeed does he even deal with this text? It would be wrong to move the encounter between exegete and text to a 'neutral zone', as if there were, on the one side, a text of timeless value (at any rate) and devoid of history (possibly) and, on the other side, an exegete who approaches the text free of all presuppositions. There is no exegesis without presuppositions. Each interpretation is at least influenced by the exegete's own historical setting. Therefore, he must first of all be clear about the presuppositions he brings along. One should not understand this in terms of psychological introspection. Rather, it is essential to determine one's own position, so that the exegete does not yield to an inappropriate identification between what the text says and the exegete's predetermined expectations (Conzelmann and Lindemann 1988: 2).<sup>13</sup>

### *The Problem of Theology*

Perhaps the most controversial current problem inherent to a discussion of the exegetical task, and one that has already been touched upon in the two previous sections concerning history and presuppositions, is the question of theology and its place within biblical interpretation. More specifically, this has been referred to as the dilemma between descriptive (non-confessional) and prescriptive (confessional) approaches to exegesis. That the Bible is considered by many to be a sacred religious text hardly needs to be said. However, for most Christian believers, this 'sacredness' implies a number of faith assumptions: (1) in some shape or form the Bible is thought to record the word(s) of God, (2) more so than other writings, the Bible

<sup>13</sup> The most influential and noteworthy twentieth-century investigation of the role of prejudice and pre-understanding in the reading of texts is that of H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad; London: Sheed and Ward, 2nd edn, 1989).



is considered to embody a truer or better reflection and more accurate representation of reality, (3) the degree of authority attached to the Bible by individuals and communities supersedes that of any other literary text, and (4) the Bible is ascribed a central role in informing and guiding the faith and practice of these individuals and communities. According to a prescriptive approach to exegesis, these assumptions play at least some part in the interpretative process as exegetes seek to explain the biblical text within the context of their faith community. The task of exegesis is not simply to describe the text's historical meaning, but to stand under its authority as well. Unfortunately, this type of special hermeneutic can run the risk of ending up simply pointing out what the exegete already knew, a process often called *eisegesis* ('reading into' the text), rather than *exegesis* ('reading out from' the text). Nietzsche's forceful complaint regarding the theologian applies equally well here:

Another mark of the theologian is his *incapacity for philology*. Philology is to be understood here in a very wide sense as the art of reading well—of being able to read off a fact *without* falsifying it by interpretation, *without* losing caution, patience, subtlety, in the desire for understanding. Philology as *ephexis* [undecisiveness] in interpretation: whether it be a question of books, newspaper reports, fate or the weather—to say nothing of the 'salvation of the soul'... The way in which a theologian, no matter whether in Berlin or in Rome, interprets a 'word of Scriptures', or an experience... is always so *audacious* as to make a philologist run up every wall in sight.<sup>14</sup>

The descriptive approach to exegesis is best exemplified in the grammatico-historical method's emphasis upon what the text meant. And, as we have already seen, in its attempt to place objective distance between text and reader, the basic tenets of grammatico-historical exegesis are often perceived as being in contention with the more theologically-sensitive concerns of a prescriptive approach. Some of these tenets would include (1) a tendency to emphasize what the text meant while excluding its present meaning, (2) treating the Bible in the same fashion as one would treat any other work of ancient literature, (3) a difficulty in affirming the supernatural or miraculous in the biblical text (although, it must be said, this last point applies more to certain radical forms of grammatico-historical exegesis). Perhaps the classic statement on the problem raised by descriptive

<sup>14</sup> F. Nietzsche, 'The Anti-Christ', in *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* (trans. R.J. Hollingdale; London: Penguin, 1968), pp. 169-70.

exegesis comes from Albert Schweitzer:

The study of the Life of Jesus has had a curious history. It set out in quest of the historical Jesus, believing that when it had found Him it could bring Him straight into our time as a Teacher and Savior. It loosed the bands by which He had been riveted for centuries to the stony rocks of ecclesiastical doctrine, and rejoiced to see life and movement coming into the figure once more, and the historical Jesus advancing, as it seemed, to meet it. But He does not stay; He passes by our time and returns to His own. What surprised and dismayed the theology of the last forty years was that, despite all forced and arbitrary interpretations, it could not keep Him in our time, but had to let Him go. He returned to His own time, not owing to the application of any historical ingenuity, but by the same inevitable necessity by which the liberated pendulum returns to its original position.<sup>15</sup>

Not only is the Bible an ancient record of past communities, and in this sense historical, it is also a modern record to present communities, and in this sense theological. The distinction between the role of the exegete as a proclaimer of what the text meant, and the role of the theologian as a proclaimer of what the text means, illustrates the primary issue at the heart of biblical interpretation today. As Stenger has said, exegesis 'continually breaks its teeth on this hard nut—to the extent that it is pursued honestly' (Stenger 1993: 7).

Like our earlier student examinee, it is easy for one to be overwhelmed by the exegetical task, especially given the above discussion and in light of the various difficulties that have emerged from it. However, as Hayes and Holladay point out, one does not approach the task of biblical exegesis *de nova*:

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 (Hayes and Holladay 1987: 18).

#### CONCLUSION

As this chapter has shown, and as is exemplified throughout this entire book, exegesis is no one single thing, but rather a complex and

<sup>15</sup> A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: A. & C. Black, 2nd edn, 1945), p. 397.

multifaceted collection of disciplines. The approach or orientation one takes to exegesis, which is most often determined by the particular interests of the interpreter and the questions brought to the text, may only constitute one part of the whole exegetical task. For the linguist, exegesis becomes an analysis of lexis and grammar. For the historical critic, exegesis concerns itself with uncovering ancient backgrounds and original intentions. The theologian embraces exegesis in order to aid in the contemporization of traditions and doctrines that will continually speak in a new and vital way to present believers. The fact is that there are various aspects of a text's meaning and different types of exegesis can address these various 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 and informed interpretation is presented, based upon that interpreter's encounter with and investigation of a text at a given point in time.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Black, D.A., and D.S. Dockery (eds.)  
1991 *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Blackman, E.C.  
1954 'The Task of Exegesis', in W.D. Davies and D. Daube (eds.), *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*. London: Cambridge University Press: 3-26.
- 1957 *Biblical Interpretation*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Brown, R.E.  
1985 *Biblical Exegesis and Church Doctrine*. New York: Paulist.
- Bultmann, R.  
1960 'Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?', in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*. Trans. S.M. Ogden. Cleveland/New York: Meridian Books: 289-315.
- Carson, D.A.  
1996 *Exegetical Fallacies*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2nd edn.
- Carson, D.A., and J.D. Woodbridge (eds.)  
1986 *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Conzelmann, H., and A. Lindemann  
1988 *Interpreting the New Testament: An Introduction to the Principles and Methods of New Testament Exegesis*. Trans. S.S. Schatzmann, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985.
- Danker, F.W.  
1970 *Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study*. St Louis: Concordia, 3rd edn.

- Doty, W.G.  
1972 *Contemporary New Testament Interpretation*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Ebeling, G.  
1963 *Word and Faith*. Trans. J.W. Leitch. London: SCM Press, 1963.
- Epp, E.J., and G.W. MacRae (eds.)  
1989 *The New Testament and its Modern Interpreters*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Fee, G.D.  
1993 *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, rev. edn.
- Fee, G.D., and D. Stuart  
1993 *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2nd edn.
- Fitzmyer, J.A.  
1981 *An Introductory Bibliography for the Study of Scripture*. Subsidia Biblica, 3. Rome: Biblical Institute Press, rev. edn.
- France, R.T.  
1979 *A Bibliographic Guide to New Testament Research*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 3rd edn.
- Furnish, V.P.  
1973 'Some Practical Guidelines for New Testament Exegesis'. *PSTJ* 26: 1-16.
- Grant, R.M., and D. Tracy  
1984 *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*. London: SCM Press, 2nd edn.
- Hagner, D.A.  
1992 *New Testament Exegesis and Research: A Guide for Seminarians*. Fuller Theological Seminary: D.A. Hagner.
- Harrington, D.J.  
1979 *Interpreting the New Testament: A Practical Guide*. New Testament Message, 1. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier.
- Hayes, J.H., and C.R. Holladay  
1987 *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook*. London: SCM Press, 2nd edn.
- Kaiser, O., and W.G. Kümmel  
1981 *Exegetical Method: A Student's Handbook*. Trans. E.V.N. Goetschius and M.J. O'Connell. New York: Seabury, rev. edn.
- Keck, L.E., and G.M. Tucker  
1976 'Exegesis'. *IDBSup*. Nashville: Abingdon: 296-303.
- Kugel, J.L., and R.A. Greer  
1986 *Early Biblical Interpretation*. LEC, 3. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Kümmel, W.G.  
1973 *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*. NTL. Trans. S. McLean Gilmour and H.C. Kee. Nashville: Abingdon; London: SCM Press.