

# BIBLICAL. Exegesis GUIDE

This guide is based on an Exegesis Guide made by Dr. Dennis Olson. Although this guide includes some basic tools for working with the Hebrew language, it was developed primarily for doing exegesis with only English texts. **The guide has been altered by the Office of Digital Learning to help those who are writing exegesis papers without physical access to a library.**

These guidelines are written for students preparing an exegetical paper of some length and over the course of several weeks. Even such a paper may not include all the steps involved here. But the guidelines help to give a general sense of possible procedure and methods that may vary depending on the particular text and the setting in which exegesis is done.

# Getting Started

1. Begin by slowly and carefully reading the passage, making note of any questions you have about expressions you find to be ambiguous or difficult.
2. Locate the larger context (i.e., is it part of a prophetic oracle, an episode in a larger narrative cycle, part of a collection of sayings, an individual psalm, a speech?) Study the larger literary context with care. Skim through the book as a whole, getting a sense of its general structure and movement and the role that your passage might place in that larger structure. Note the themes and major concerns of the book.
3. Compare a number of English translations of the same text. Note the differences among them. These differences may provide clues to some of the problems in the text. The key is to look for key and substantive differences in translation as markers of potential issues for interpretation.

The website, **Bible Gateway**, allows you to type in your biblical reference and then see 20 different English Bible translations of the verses (recommended NRSV, RSV, NIV, CEB, NASB).

4. Begin to make lists of your questions and observations. Try to imagine yourself as a member of the community or communities who first heard this text. What questions might it raise for you? What questions might a modern biblical scholar ask? What theological issues are raised by the text? Which words are unclear? What words seem particularly important in the text itself?

In general, ask yourself: what do I need to know in order to understand this text?

5. Now go back to your list and try to organize your questions. Which ones are literary? Historical? Theological? Be aware that some questions will arise from the text in similar ways for many readers in many different times and places throughout the history of biblical interpretation. Other questions will arise more from our own distinctive cultural or historical or theological location or from our own personal or individual history. Both kinds of questions are legitimate to raise, but it may be helpful to be aware of some such preliminary distinction.
6. Before your turn to reference works, dictionaries, commentaries, or any secondary sources, **try to answer your questions on your own**. Using only your Bible, a Bible dictionary, an English translation, an English concordance or a computer program like Accordance, or an online version from **Bible Study Tools**, and your working knowledge of the book in which your text is located, try to answer the questions your reading of the passage has raised.

**a. Text criticism.** We have no original manuscripts in Hebrew of any Old Testament book. The standard Hebrew Old Testament is based on the earliest complete Hebrew Bible in the Leningrad Codex which is dated from around 1008 CE. (Middle Ages). We have multiple earlier translations (Syriac, Greek, Latin, Aramaic) and partial Hebrew Bible texts (for example, the Dead Sea Scrolls) which reflect variants that change the translations of numerous verses throughout the OT. As a result, different English translations of the Bible will sometimes contain quite different readings for the same verse. So, a first step is to compare a number of Bible translations of your chosen verses.

More technical commentaries may include discussions of text critical variants. The **Hermeneia** and the **International Critical Commentaries** are available to PTS students on the PTS Library website under “Databases.”

**b. Word studies.** Remember that the main goal of a word study, especially in the context of beginning an exegesis paper, is to ascertain what a word means **in a given context**.

**i.** There are basically two reasons to do a study of a particular word:

1. Its meaning is obscure or ambiguous in the context so you need to check other occurrences of the same word in similar literature in the Hebrew Bible (similar in terms of genre, tradition or time) to clarify its meaning.
2. The word is central to the theme or literary shape of the passage so that its full meaning and associations need to be explored for a full appreciation of the text's use of the word (catchwords, puns or other word plays, deliberate ambiguities in meaning, irony, etc.). Check to see if a keyword or image occurs elsewhere within the biblical book.

**ii.** After examining the use of a word in the text in question and within the biblical book, you may want to see how the word is used elsewhere in the Old Testament. What similarities or differences do you find? Also check the indices of OT texts listed in the back of Greek New Testament editions (Aland and Nestle) for allusions or quotations of Old Testament text; see if your Old Testament text is listed and where it might be quoted in the New Testament. This broadens beyond single word study to broader allusions and quotations.

1. An excellent computer program for biblical concordance and word studies is Accordance if you have access to it; however, it can be expensive.
2. Free web-based biblical word and phrase search tool are available at **Blue Letter Bible**, **Scholar's Gateway**, and **Step Bible**. For more information about how to use these online biblical studies tools, see the appendix at the end of this guide.

**c. Literary analysis.** How is the text put together? What kinds of imagery, plot structure, argumentation, movement in theme, and repetitions are evident? Repetition is a very important device in the Hebrew Bible on several levels, most obviously in poetry but also within narratives. Outline the passage, noting repetitions, parallels, and especially interruptions of a thought or argument. Such intrusions or syntactical oddities are often significant (for example, the "intrusion" of the Judah-Tamar story of Genesis 38 into the Joseph story of Genesis 37-50 or the "intrusion" of a parenthetical comment in a narrative or poetic text).

**d. Theological analysis.** What is at stake in this passage theologically? How does it serve the theological purpose of the larger text? Beware of identifying the passage with a particular "doctrine," "principle" (for example, the "law" or God's "omniscience") because of what you believe the church teaches at present. Try to follow the grain of the text's own words, recognizing that we are always bringing some of our own presuppositions to the text. Be open to having some of your present understandings jostled or changed by the text; it's at those points where exegesis can be most interesting and challenging. Welcome those opportunities! Be open to being surprised.

**e. Historical, social and cultural analysis.** Are there references to particular events, persons, social and political contexts, or ancient cultural realities that you can understand in light of something said elsewhere in this biblical book or elsewhere in the Old Testament? in light of your knowledge of the history of Israel or the history of the ancient Near East? Here you may need to be dependent on secondary sources, but identify the issues you think might be pertinent to the passage.

7. Now turn back to your original questions. How would you answer them based on what you have already learned? Which questions now seem very important? What have begun to fade away? Try to pull this initial stage of work together by writing out a paraphrase of the text based on your tentative conclusions. Ask a friend to read the text and your paraphrase and evaluate your work so far. What questions does the friend have about what you have done? What does the friend see in the passage that you do not?

## Broadening the Inquiry

When you have completed the initial investigation of your text, you will want to learn what other students have to say about your text. These secondary sources may only reinforce your own conclusions. Probably they will also introduce new information as well as new questions. All of this will--and should--lead you back to the text with new insights and issues.

There are several types of secondary sources you will want to consult:

### 1. Dictionaries and other reference works.

A list of online bible dictionaries can be found at **Bible Study Tools**, and, although they are a little dated, the **Union Bible Dictionary** and the **Westminster Bible Dictionary** can be found online through the seminary library.

None of these should be regarded as objective, bias-free reference works. Some articles may be highly slanted and contain some theological presuppositions which may distort the article. Use them, but remember that they are secondary sources, not a substitute for your own word-study.

### 2. Commentaries.

Commentaries are an invaluable resource if used with care. Good lists of commentaries may be found in the Harper's Commentary on the Bible and the New Jerome Biblical Commentary. A list of commentaries for each book of the Bible that are recommended by the PTS Biblical Department faculty may be found on the PTS webpage under Academics/the Biblical Department ("Resources").

Do not attempt to track down a large number of commentaries just to add them to your bibliography. Three or four high-quality commentaries from good publishers by good scholars may be sufficient. Some commentaries that are quite old are still excellent on some books of the Old Testament (e.g., the International Critical Commentary series), but an exegesis that relies too heavily on them will miss important recent questions and insights.

Some commentaries are available online through the library website (e.g., Hermeneia and the International Critical Commentaries).

### 3. Monographs.

Books that treat one issue or passage in some detail may be particularly helpful. Note those mentioned in the commentaries, and check to see whether they treat your text. This need not be an overwhelming task. Simply check to see whether your text is listed in the index. Of course, you will have to be careful to understand the context in which any comments are made.

### 4. Articles.

In many cases, scholarly articles contain a treasure of information about particular texts.

**a.** The online "Databases" available through the seminary's library website **library.ptsem.edu** is an invaluable search tool for finding articles and essays related to specific biblical texts, words or themes. To access:

1. At the library website, click on “Browse the databases list.”
2. Click “Academic Search Premier” or “ATLA Religion Database with ATLA Serials.”
3. You will see an EBSCOhost search page where you can type in your biblical text, word, theme or topic. Under “Limit your results,” click on “Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals” to help ensure a higher quality resource. With these searches, you can find references and sometime the full articles related to your research interest. You can often find PDF files or other sources so that you can download articles to your computer.

**b.** Scanning the article titles will help guide you to those which may be most fruitful. Choose among the articles selectively. Find those which seem most directly relevant to the historical, literary or theological dimensions of the text which will affect its meaning or interpretation. Some articles may deal with quite obscure details of the text and may not affect significantly your interpretation of the text for the purposes of theological exposition. Footnotes and bibliographies in books and articles will give you more options as well.

**c.** Another helpful database is “Old Testament Abstracts” which provides short summaries of OT-related articles. You can more quickly determine whether a given article or essay might be helpful.

**d.** Another helpful resource on the library’s “Databases” is the Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception (de Gruyter)—about half of 30 volumes now available.

This new information should lead you back to the text again and again. You will not--and should not--agree with all that you read. Just be sure that you know what position you have taken and indicate the reasons **why**. Remember that you are an exegete also!

## Organizing and Writing

### 1. Putting it all together.

In a sense, "completing" the exegetical process is virtually impossible. There is always one more commentary to read or one more article to consult. There are paths of inquiry that must be left for another time. At some point, however, you will need to draw the line and conclude this stage of the exegetical process. As you try to bring order to your research, keep firmly before you the question: What does this text seek to do to the reader or hearer? Who or what is doing the action? Who

or what is being acted upon? What does this text say to its original audience and to us concerning matters of God, humans, the world and issues of life and death? The answers to these questions are not just the goal of the paper, but the means by which you organize the paper.

## 2. Form

While there is no single format according to which exegesis papers should be written, the following comments may be helpful:

**a. Translation and Textual Notes.** You should begin with a careful translation of the text along with textual notes that include **significant** or **unusual** grammatical, syntactical or text-critical matters. Three or four notes for 10-15 verses might be a general rule of thumb. Some texts will have less, some more.

**b. Introduction.** Perhaps the best way to conceptualize this section is to think of it as setting the stage for what is to follow. You may wish to introduce the whole project by indicating why you chose this text and what questions emerged as crucial to understanding it. Certainly you will want to write a **terse** paragraph regarding the book in which your text occurs and the place of your text within that book.

Please note: One temptation is to expand this section greatly. Resist! It should take up no more than **10-15%** of your finished exegesis. This section simply sets the stage. It is not the ultimate treatment of the problem of evil in the Old Testament or the final solution to the documentary hypothesis.

**c. Exposition.** The exposition is the body of the any exegesis paper and should account for at least **60%** of the paper. It consists of a coherent and organized commentary on your passage. This may proceed verse-by-verse, or thought-by-thought, or some other process of organization suggested by your work on the text. Since word studies are done in order to shed light on words in their context, they should be incorporated into the exposition when they are helpful to understanding the text.

**d. Conclusions.** In the final section of the exegesis portion of the paper, (roughly 20%), pull together what you have learned and reflect on it. Try to explain what the text means in light of various possible interpretive frameworks. Options include: what the text means within its original historical or cultural contexts, what it means within its present literary context, what it means in light of the witness of other Old and New Testament themes and witnesses, what it means in light of the history of biblical interpretations of this text or in light of issues in Christian

light of contemporary issues and concerns. One cannot begin to address all of these contexts, so you will have to choose what may be most faithful and most fruitful in interpreting a given text. These dialog partners are potential stimulants to a conversation with the text that will bring you to certain provisional conclusions about the meaning of the passage for this time, place and situation.

You may find it helpful to paraphrase the text in contemporary language (a poem? a song? a picture or diagram?) and then explain your paraphrase. The need here is to continue to listen to the text while also listening to the world around you. Seek to do again to your readers and hearers what the text did to its earlier readers and hearers.

## A Hermeneutics of Consent Vs. a Hermeneutics of Suspicion.

Contemporary readers of the Bible often wrestle with certain troublesome texts of the Bible that reflect values, ideologies, images or themes which they find hard to accept. Certain images of God, views of women and men, assumptions about race or class, or certain values that we may not share may cause us to pull up short. We find it difficult to **consent** to the text's teaching and thus read it with a hermeneutics of **suspicion**.

The text itself, of course, does not have an ideology apart from someone with a particular interpretive strategy reading the text and making the claim that a text displays a certain ideology. When challenged in this way, a reader of the Bible needs to reflect on their unease about the text and discern how and why that unease arises. The reader should be open to **being** challenged by the text while also feeling free to question the text. Within a community of faith where the Bible functions as a norm or authority, such challenges and suspicion may perhaps best be grounded by referring to other biblical texts which we might argue override or balance a given passage. The Bible contains many voices with some critiquing or challenging or balancing other voices within the same Scripture. Such intra-biblical dialog can be a helpful way of thinking about how to wrestle with texts, images or themes to which we do not easily consent. Moreover, the interplay of consent and suspicion should be as much a part of reading our own assumptions and positions as it is a part of reading the biblical text. Such challenges often best come from readers different from us who are interpreting the same biblical text. It is within a community of diverse readers, both in body and in text, that the most enlivening interpretation of Scripture occurs.



# Appendix

## Online Biblical Studies Resources:

### Blue Letter Bible

- To use this tool Search the Book, Chapter, and Verse that you are trying to look up. And choose the bible that you would like to look it up in (i.e. Westminster Leningrad Codex, NASB, NIV, etc...)
- The “Tools” button next to every verse gives options for viewing information about the text
- The “Interlinear” tab gives the original language of each of the verse (This is the most helpful tab for translation work)
- It also gives Strong’s Concordance #s and links for almost every word –when the blue link to the Concordance # is clicked there are basic dictionary/concordance resources available
- Some of the words can be parsed- this will appear as a blue link under the column that says “Parsing”
- The “Bibles” tab gives a list of different translations for the chosen verse o The “Commentary” tab gives available commentaries for this verse.
- The “Dictionaries ”Tab gives a list of dictionary entries that might be helpful.

### Scholar’s Gateway

- To use this tool use the Search Bar to bring up your selected text by scrolling over the word you are interested a parsing guide will appear.
- You can have multiple translations present and can view them as parallel by clicking the “parallel” box at the top of the text.
- The “Word Parser” tab at the top of the page will give more in depth parsing for the selected text.

## Step Bible

- In order to use Step Bible enter the text you wish to view, along with the bible(s) you would like to view in, in the top search bar (You can also search the different kinds of bibles by clicking the 'Advanced Search' option when you go to type in the search bar)
- By hovering over a word with your mouse, you can get a dictionary entry/gloss for the word
- You can add multiple bibles as interlinear in the same screen by entering multiple bibles into the search bar
- You can also add parallel views by clicking the '+' sign at the top right hand of the box with the biblical text

Find more resources at  
[learning.ptsem.edu](https://learning.ptsem.edu)

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