

A BRIEF GUIDE TO WRITING AN EXEGESIS

One type of writing you will be invariably asked to do in Divinity School is *exegesis*. An exegesis is essentially an *interpretation*. However, it doesn't take much thought to realize that when we interpret something we read, whether it is a scriptural passage, a poem, or a scientific finding, there are several ways of going about the process.

For example, we might focus on what the author seems to mean or what we understand by the text; the historical situation in which the document was written; whether the words were written with attention to their literal meaning or a symbolic and metaphorical meaning; whether the words are deemed the Word of God or words of humankind; and so on. The permutations are endless.

Additionally, not only do we face general theoretical issues about how we interpret a text, we must also take into account the fact that if we are writing for a particular class—and thus for a particular professor and/or preceptor—we need to pay attention to the instructions we receive.

Therefore, it should be clear that there is not just one way to write an exegesis. Below you will find an overview of what you might consider when putting together a scriptural exegesis. The elements presented here *are an amalgamation of specific instructions formulated by faculty members of the Divinity School*. Note well that while this overview attempts to orientate you to exegetical writing, you should always pay close attention to your own professor's requirements.

- I. Become *intimate* with the text you will exegete. This can be done in several ways:
 - a. read it through several times (aloud and/or silently)
 - b. copy it out
 - c. make an outline of it
 - d. note down what puzzles, excites, inspires, worries, angers you

- II. *Locate* the text. That is, put it in a context. Again, this can be done in a number of ways:
 - a. consider the historical, social, economic, political, and religious background of what is *in* the text and *of the time when it was written* (the two may not be the same—think of a historical novel, for example, about ancient Rome that was written in the nineteenth century)
 - b. be aware of genre
 - c. note the borders of the text. A *pericope* (a section of scripture) obviously has a beginning and an end, but you should pay attention to what comes immediately before and after, as well as the larger context: the biblical book, the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible or New Testament

III. Analyze the *language* of the text.

- a. in what language was the text written? Are you rereading the original language or a translation? If the latter, then
- b. examine various translations, paying attention to different words choices and arrangement (syntax)
- c. do some words and expressions seem particularly significant?
- d. what rhetorical devices—such as repetition—are used?
- e. are there intertextual elements present? These could be in the form of direct quotation or indirect allusions.
- f. are the words meant to be read literally and/or metaphorically?

IV. Consider the *literary elements* of the text.

One common mistake that many students make when they first write an exegesis is to forget they are reading a *written artifact, a composition*. They read what is written and focus on *what* the words convey and fail to think about *how* meaning is conveyed. But *how* a message is communicated is part of its meaning (we need only think about the statement “I like your outfit” uttered ironically to realize that meaning can be the opposite of what is literally stated). Therefore, note the

- a. rhetorical devices such as
 - i. repetition
 - ii. imagery
 - iii. symbolism
 - iv. metaphor,
 - v. intertextuality, etc.
- b. structural form
 - i. narrative
 - ii. dialogue, etc.
- c. genre
 - i. prose
 - ii. poetry
 - iii. epistle
 - iv. song, etc.

V. Work with *scholarly writing* on the text. In journals such as the *Journal of Biblical Literature, New Testament Studies*, biblical commentaries, etc., you will find articles on sundry biblical passages by experts in their fields. These can be consulted and used to expand your own exegesis. However, whether you use secondary sources or not should *depend on the instruction of your professor*. Initially, you may be asked to write an exegesis without reference to such scholarly work.