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An Introduction: The Task and Method of Exegesis

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An Introduction: The Task and Method of Exegesis

Abraham J. Malherbe

Exegesis is the basic discipline, not only of N. T. studies, but of theology. As to form, theology must always be the exegesis of Scripture.1 Exegesis must govern theology. Theology must not be allowed to rule exegesis, for then this discipline loses its character and becomes eisegesis. The history of the interpretation of the N. T. shows that the relationship between exegesis and theology has not always been discerned clearly. It is the purpose of this collection of articles to contribute to the interpretation of the N. T. both from the standpoint of method and from the standpoint of the history of the interpretation of the N. T. The present article finds its place in this collection by virtue of its attempt to contribute to obtaining a clearer perspective of the task of exegesis, and through advancing considerations for a methodology for the exegesis of the N. T.

The Task of Exegesis

The task of the exegete is, first and foremost, an historical one. "Exegesis is thought of as the procedure for establishing the original meaning of a literary text by the use of philological and historical tools."2 The exegete is thus an historian and not a theologian.3 The difficulty enters when we realize that everyone has certain theological presuppositions. The exegete's task is to read the text and explain it—a task which is as difficult to describe as it is difficult to perform. Exegesis has a part in the problems which flow forth from any writing which is separated from us by centuries and is transmitted to us in another language. But the N. T. is different from any other writing which is so transmitted to us. It is different since, although directed to the people of the first century, it is also directed to people of all time.4

It is precisely because of this understanding of Scripture that the method, and so the results of exegesis, sometimes suffers. The writers of the Bible were not mere chroniclers. The events they recorded had the meaning of revelation for them, and that was the

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2James J. Mays, Exegesis as a theological discipline, Inaugural address delivered at Union Theol. Sem., Richmond, Va., April 20, 1960.
reason they recorded them. To understand the intent and the meaning of the Biblical writers, therefore, we should have empathy with them, and this means that when we read them we go outside the area of impersonal analysis of literary documents. The area of hermeneutics is thus a necessary corollary to the area of exegesis. It should be recognized that the division of Biblical interpretation in which exegesis and hermeneutics fall into different treatments, as in the present collection, is really an artificial one. This division is adopted purely for the sake of convenience. This article should be read in conjunction with the one by Don H. McGaughey in this issue.

Hermeneutics means, literally, the discipline of interpretation. No one comes to the N. T. without any preconceptions “as though he were the blank report paper on which the objective measurable data from a controlled experiment is to be recorded.” The task of hermeneutics is to make a synthesis of the results of exegesis, and to make it relevant to the reader. Making it relevant involves a personal element with all its presuppositions, and this means that we interpret the material. The question to decide is not whether interpretation exists in a proper application of exegesis or not. What is to be decided is whether a particular interpretation is valid or not.

The admission that presuppositions are present does not mean that we are therefore adrift in a sea of subjectivity. “Presupposition” has become a scareword because “scientific” exegesis, in its opposition to “theological” exegesis, charged that the latter allowed its practice to be dominated by dogmatic propositions. In reaction to this charge it was and is denied that any presuppositions exist in exegesis. A more legitimate response would have been that presuppositions do indeed exist, but that the validity, and not the existence of these presuppositions is the real issue in the interpretation of the N. T. This fact has come to be recognized in the battle between Barth and Bultmann over the nature of hermeneutics. Both agree that presuppositions are a part of hermeneutics.

The issues which are important for us in our present concern are clearly accented in the method of exegesis followed by the history of religions school, the so-called **religionsgeschichtliche Schule**, which

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6Cf. the articles in *Journal of Biblical Interpretation* 77 (1958) by Mullenberg, Rylaarsdam and Stendahl for a recent discussion of the historical method and the present day situation.

7Mays, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

8Ibid.

arose in Germany at the end of the nineteenth, and the beginning of the twentieth century, and which still exerts great influence on N. T. scholarship. These fathers of the historical-critical method involved themselves in the error of assuming that by the rejection of orthodox-dogmatic presuppositions they had opened the way to an appropriate exegesis. Actually, in place of these orthodox-dogmatic presuppositions, there appeared the new “dogmatic” premises of a theology determined by the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Idealism. In attacking the theological exegetical method, the weapon of the historical critic was, of course, history. The emphasis was on the fact that the Biblical text was a part of history, and that it had a history of its own. It was therefore to be placed in the relative and conditioned context of history. The text was thus to be studied in the same manner that any other ancient text is studied scientifically.

What is actually questionable in this approach is its concept of history itself. “While it derived its awareness of the necessity of the category ‘historical’ from Scripture itself, it acquired its definition of what history is from outside Scripture—and was born schizophrenic. It is not enough in interpretation merely to ask the historical question because the material belongs to history. One must also fashion a notion of history appropriate to the material so that in asking the question real interpretation is possible. This historical criticism up to our time has never successfully done.” The result has been that the process of exegesis ends in a fragmentation of the text in which literary fragments, historical documents, phenomenological and linguistic elements clutter the view to such a degree that the text and its message are obscured, and true interpretation is impossible. These are the fruits of a wrong presupposition.

Since the category “historical” is inherent in Scripture itself, and since it has to be admitted that we do have presuppositions, a valid interpretation would be one in which the two are congruent. Such a method is one which proceeds from a Christological base. This presupposition is that in Christ a new meaning of history is revealed—revealed in the first century, but with a validity for all time. This presupposition was also that of the writers of the N. T. There is

12Mays, op. cit., p. 8; cf. C. K. Barrett, Yesterday, Today and Forever. The New Testament Problem, Inaug. address, Univ. of Durham, 12 May, 1959, p. 4: The N. T. student “is thus confronted not only with the problem of historicity, which is on the whole an academic one, but also with the problem of history. History is not a matter of the past only, but an organic process in which past and present are inseparably related, and the way in which the N. T. history is presented compels the student of it to ask questions about God’s purpose, and his own place, in history.”
therefore no tension between our view of history and that of the N. T. itself, and we can approach it as an object in history which not only can be interpreted today, but must be interpreted because it gives meaning to our own historical existence.

But what does this understanding mean to us in our concern with exegetical method? Does it deny the value of the historical-critical method? Does it mean that what has been described as a valid presupposition will force dogmatic propositions into the text and so rule exegesis? To both of the last two questions the answer should be an emphatic "no." The N. T., which is the explication of the Christological message, which is our presupposition, is nevertheless a phenomenon in history, which not only gives meaning to history but partakes of it. The Christ of faith is the same as the Christ of history. Therefore, if the Biblical revelation is to be understood correctly, it must be subjected to the method of historical criticism. "Historical and philological exegesis should define and describe the human and accidental setting within which the Biblical revelation has had to show itself at a given point of history." Seen in this way, the Christological presupposition creates the framework within which the text is to be studied, but its emphasis is to be on the hermeneutical aspects of interpretation, as hermeneutics is conceived of in this volume. Christ is in a very real way the spiritual sense of interpretation. "This provides us with both a canon of interpretation and a principle of unity."

The great contributions of historical criticism need thus not be surrendered. Indeed, they cannot be surrendered. If the presupposition underlying historical criticism is a valid one, this method of exegesis makes for a more articulated theology, for it helps to understand the N. T. in its context.

The Method of Exegesis

We shall now list some considerations that must be present in the

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15Blackman, op. cit., p. 22.
16This evaluation of historical criticism does not imply that all the judgments of its advocates can be accepted uncritically. Because of its insistence that the N. T. is to be understood as a collection of writings of one religion among others, it tends to interpret it in terms of the other religions which existed in the period of its origin. This attitude has the effect of seeing influence upon the N. T. by these other religions to a disproportionate degree. The uniqueness of the N. T. is thus slighted. This approach is also ultimately responsible for wrong judgments in connection with the dating and relevance of historical material. Minor methodological points also suffer. This should not have the effect on the exegete of discarding this basic approach, however, but should cause him to apply a sounder and more responsible historical method. "The excesses of rationalism are not cured by flight into irrationalism, but only by a truer use of reason." Blackman, op. cit., p. 10.
exegesis of a N. T. text. The great danger in outlining a procedure to be followed in exegesis is that the impression can be left that the text is a synthetic composite of elements of text, language, context, background, etc. which can be peeled off like the layers of an onion. The text, however, is not a mere juxtaposition of elements without any mutual penetration. It is much rather a syncretistic blend of different elements in which mutual penetration has brought about a new entity. Any analysis of a text should therefore be conscious of two aspects of any one element: (1) the peculiar meaning that it has as an isolated entity, i.e., the meaning that it will contribute to the whole, and (2) the conditioning that it undergoes as part of the whole to which it contributes. The interpenetration which takes place in the second of these aspects cautions us against the danger of oversimplification which is attendant on the outlining of any simple exegetical procedure.

Therefore, although the order in which the following elements of exegesis is presented seems a reasonable one, it will be found that it is unlikely that one will remain in one area of investigation without infringing on another. There are also cogent reasons why the order can be changed.

Two further preliminary remarks need to be made. First, in this article it will not be possible to discuss all the tools to be used in exegesis. The reader is strongly urged to acquire the very excellent book by Frederick W. Danker, *Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), which gives a thorough description and evaluation of the tools, and illustrates how to use them. This book will be of great value to the expert as well as to the non-expert.

Secondly, it is self-evident that the reader of the N. T. who does not have a working knowledge of Greek is at an appreciable disadvantage. This discussion will emphasize a method which presupposes such a knowledge, although suggestions will be made for those who do not have the gift of tongues. The latter are encouraged to acquire at least a rudimentary knowledge of Greek to the extent that they can use an interlinear Greek and English N. T. with discretion and can make use of critical commentaries and lexicons. Such a knowledge can be acquired with the aid of a book like D. F. Hudson, *Teach Yourself N. T. Greek* (New York: Associated Press, 1960). Perhaps it should be pointed out that the student of Greek soon learns that modesty with regard to his ability as a Greek scholar increases in proportion to the number of years devoted to the study of the language.

**Text**

The problem of text is treated in greater detail in the article by Frank Pack in this volume. Any exegesis has to begin with a study of the textual variants, and a textual base has to be arrived at through application of the accepted canons of textual criticism. This means, of course, that an edition of the Greek N. T. must be used.
which contains a critical apparatus that shows the variants. Of this
type of text, most readily available are that of The British and For­
Kilpatrick, and the Nestle text, twenty-fourth edition (Stuttgart,
1960), edited by Kurt Aland. A new edition of Nestle, in which the
apparatus will be altogether reworked and expanded, will be avail­
able in the near future. Although the physical make-up of the for­
mer is perhaps to be preferred, the Nestle-Aland text has more com­
plete marginal notes which are of great value to the exegete. The
chapter entitled “The Nestle Text” in Professor Danker’s book can
be read with great profit by all who wish to draw from the tremen­
dous riches of this little volume.

Although the person who uses an English translation only will not
be able to go into the intricacies of textual study, he can be aware of
the more important variants by using the American Standard or the
Revised Standard Version. In the margins and the footnotes of these
versions some variants are indicated. If a variant reading is indi­
cated in a particular passage, the strength of its attestation can be
checked to some degree by comparing a number of modern speech
versions. If they do not all have the same preferred reading, the
matter will certainly bear looking into further. A good commentary
will discuss the problem, and indicate what issues are involved. This
is by no means a fool-proof method of determining the importance of
variant readings. If a variant is important enough to be indicated
in a translation, it is important enough to be investigated.

Language

After the text has been established, the exegete can begin the
process of translation. Translation involves more than the substitu­
tion of English words for their roughly equivalent Greek counter­
parts. It involves the elements of language study (philology, gram­
mar, etc.), but also that of context and background. The study of
the language of the text is thus only the first step in the process of
translation. For a more detailed study of the problem of language,
the reader is referred to the article by J. W. Roberts. Here only a
few suggestions are made in the interests of outlining exege­
etical procedure.

1. The first task in language study is to determine the possible
meanings of every significant word in the text under considera­
tion. The standard Greek lexicons should be consulted, but the
serious reader should go further than this. The different possible
meanings that the lexicon indicates are not to be regarded as being
basically different from each other. The differences rather rep­
resent the vantage points from which the lexicographer viewed
the basic conception contained in the word. By consulting all the
references given on a particular word, the reader will begin to see
the reason the lexicographer made his divisions. Only when he
sees the reason for this division will he be on the way to really
understanding the meaning of the word.
2. A concordance is indispensable in philological study. A particular word should first be studied as to its use by the author of the text under consideration. A concordance is required for this. A glance at a concordance will sometimes show that a word has a habit of appearing in a particular author in the company with the same other words. Sometimes a pattern of usage or a complex is discernible which immediately casts light on the meaning for a particular passage.

3. From the investigation of passages by the same author, proceed to the other places where it occurs in the N. T. Then go to the Septuagint, keeping in mind that it was the Bible for most of the N. T. writers. Then go to the places in the early Christian literature where the word occurs to see how it was understood, then to the Jewish writers extant in Greek, and finally, to pagan Greek.

4. The most significant words can be studied in works like Kittel-Friedrich, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, from which some articles have been translated and printed under the title *Bible Key Words*, edited by J. R. Coates. Old, but still useful, is Hermann Cremer’s *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek*. For non-Greek readers, Alan Richardson, ed., *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*; J. J. von Allmen, *Vocabulary of the Bible*; and especially W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* are excellent helps.

5. After the possible and probable meanings of the words have been ascertained, the text should be studied from a grammatical and syntactical point of view. By all means the indices of scripture references in the standard N. T. Greek grammars should be consulted to see if the passage under study is discussed in the grammar. The best N. T. grammar for reference use is Blass-Debrunner, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*, ninth edition. An English translation of this work by Robert Funk has just been published.

**Context**

The context of the passage will help to create the perspective in which the text is to be seen. The following considerations are important for determining the situation in which the text has meaning.

1. Larger Context. Here all the introductory matters are to be considered, such as authorship, date, destination, purpose, etc. These questions are discussed in the standard introductions to the N. T. Among the most useful are those of McNeile, Moffatt, and Zahn.

2. Immediate Context. Determine what place the text under consideration occupies in the argument of the whole writing. How does it fit in the immediate context in which it appears?

3. Parallel Passages. How does the same author, and how do other writers in the N. T. treat the same problem in other places?
a. By looking up the important words involved in a concordance or topical Bible, the parallel passages can be located.

b. The references in the outside margin of the Nestle text which are marked with an exclamation mark (!) are especially helpful. This means that at the reference after which it appears, the references will be indicated where the subject is discussed. For example, in the outer margin at 1 Cor. 16:1, where the contribution is discussed, there is the following: Acts 11:29! When one turns to Acts 11:29, he finds in the outside margin references where the contribution is discussed. Of course, this sometimes involves the judgment of the editor, but it is a helpful device.

c. When studying the Synoptic Gospels, a synopsis like that of Huck-Lietzmann, *Synopse der drei ersten Evangelien* for the Greek text, or *Gospel Parallels*, which gives the RSV translation, should be used. Check the context of the same event or discourse in the other gospels to see how it was used.

**Background**

Background study is really a part of the attempt to determine the context in which the text appears and to translate the language which would be meaningful in this context. The background against which the N. T. was written was both Jewish and pagan. The articles by Jack P. Lewis and Roy B. Ward discuss the study of these backgrounds. Background study is always difficult because the material is extremely complex. It is therefore not surprising that it is in this area of the exegetical discipline that the temptation is greatest to make generalizations. In studying the background for any possible relevance, the following questions will help to form an approach to the material:

1. Is any particular material that comes into the discussion really possibly relevant to the text in question so far as its date and provenience are concerned?

2. Is the background material more relevant to the writer of the text, or to his readers?

3. How intense is the relevance of background material: Was it strong enough to be termed influence, or merely conveniently common enough to be termed points of contact?

4. Is the relevance of the background material being judged by historical probability, or by subjective judgment?

**Foreground**

Still a further part of the effort to obtain historical perspective is to check the Christian foreground.

1. The treatment a particular passage received in the early church is instructive both for the possible understanding of the passage by the original recipients, and also for background elements which are many times contained in the Fathers. The places where a
particular passage is used in the early church can easily be located by checking the index of Scripture passages in Volume IX of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Wm. B. Eerdmans reprint). Special attention should be paid to the early commentators like Origen and Hippolytus. For a little later period, but very excellent on the Pauline epistles, see Theodore of Mopsuestia.

2. The use of significant Greek words in the Christian foreground can be studied with the help of E. J. Goodspeed's *Index Patristicus* and *Index Apologeticus*. For later authors, some volumes in the *Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der erste drei Jahrhunderten* series contain selected indices. The new *Lexicon of Patristic Greek*, edited by G. W. H. Lampe (first section just published) will be of great value in this type of study.

3. English words can be located through the index volume of the Ante-Nicene series.

4. Some nineteenth century English commentaries, like those of Westcott, Lightfoot in the Macmillan series, and the series by Ellicott on the Greek text usually refers to Patristic passages and can be used with profit.

**Exegetical Studies**

Detailed exegetical studies by modern scholars, devoted to the passage under study, or to problems connected with it, should be used. Such articles appear in scholarly journals and books where they might be lost if it were not for some excellent tools which make us aware of their existence. These reference works survey all the literature which appears in the Biblical field and record what significant work has been done on any passage, word, concept or problem of N. T. studies. The following are the most important of these survey journals.

1. *New Testament Abstracts*, a Catholic publication, gives summaries of the most important articles which appear in scholarly N. T. journals. All the summaries are in English, although the survey covers all the important international journals.

2. *Internationale Zeitschriften schau für Bibelwissenschaft und Grenzgebiete*, is more comprehensive and also covers the related fields. The summaries are all in German.

3. *Biblica* is published by the Pontifical Institute in Rome, and covers the whole Bible. It is the most comprehensive, and contains surveys of the most important articles in all the important modern languages and in Latin.

**Commentaries**

Commentaries, like the exegetical studies, will probably be consulted earlier in the process of exegesis. The aspirant exegete, however, should place his emphasis on the study of the primary material rather than on these secondary helps. Commentaries and shorter studies, however, do point out the problems in any text and are help-
ful by referring to relevant background material. The following types of commentaries can be used to good effect.

1. Critical commentaries like the *International Critical Commentary* series and the new German Meyer series are excellent for details in exegesis. The *Cambridge Greek Testament* series is also worthy of more honors than is usually bestowed upon it. Its value lies in its practice of usually listing various possibilities of solving a problem with dispassionate fairness and leaving the decision up to the reader. Such commentaries as these should be used before a synthesis is made.

2. Commentaries should also be used which emphasize the continuity of the book in which exegesis is done. It is necessary to get the sweep and direction of the author's thought. The Moffatt series and the new Harpers series of commentaries fall into this category. The *New International Commentary* series should probably also be included here, although individual volumes have different emphases. The *Interpreter's Bible* is a popular series which is of little value for series exegesis. Its main value lies in the excellent General Articles in Volumes I, VII and XII of the series.

*Synthesis and Paraphrase*

After research has been done in all these areas, a synthesis should be made which contains all the relevant elements which have been discerned. Blowing life into these dry bones is accomplished by returning to the text and paraphrasing it on the basis of the analysis of the different elements. This discipline will unite disparate elements, and will show a new dimension in the text itself.

Here the task of exegesis ends, and that of hermeneutics takes over to place the text and its message in the total context of theology and its relevance to present-day man.