

THIRD EDITION

ELEMENTS
of BIBLICAL
EXEGESIS

A BASIC GUIDE
for Students and Ministers

MICHAEL J. GORMAN

THIRD EDITION

ELEMENTS
of BIBLICAL
EXEGESIS

A BASIC GUIDE
for Students and Ministers

MICHAEL J. GORMAN


Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 3rd ed.
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2020
Used by permission.

Contents

Abbreviations	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction to the Third Edition	xv
Introduction to the Revised and Expanded Edition (2009)	xvii
Introduction to the First Edition (2001)	xix

Part One: Orientation

1. The Task 3
2. The Text 37

Part Two: The Elements

3. First Element: Survey 69
4. Second Element: Contextual Analysis 75
5. Third Element: Formal Analysis 89
6. Fourth Element: Detailed Analysis 109
7. Fifth Element: Synthesis 139
8. Sixth Element: Reflection—Theological Interpretation 153
9. Seventh Element: Expansion and Refinement 189

Part Three: Hints and Resources

10. Exegesis and the Exegete 199
11. Resources for Exegesis 205

Appendix A: Tables of Exegetical Methods	259
Appendix B: Practical Guidelines for Writing a Research Exegesis Paper	267
Appendix C: Sample Exegesis Papers and Sample Exegetical Summary	273
Appendix D: Selected Internet Resources for Biblical Studies	315
Index	321

Introduction to the Third Edition

For two decades now, this book has proven useful to a wide variety of students in places both expected and unexpected, not only in North America but also in many other parts of the world. It has found its way into undergraduate, seminary, and graduate classrooms in schools that are mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, Roman Catholic, and secular.¹ It has been translated into Korean and Portuguese. For all this I am both humbled and grateful.

Perhaps the most surprising anecdote about its global use and usefulness I can share is the following: While teaching, lecturing, and preaching in Cameroon in 2009, just as the second edition was being released, I (a Protestant) was invited to the modest home of a Roman Catholic priest, the pastor of a local parish who was also a part-time seminary professor. Though not too far from a city, this pastor's parish was also near the edge of the Cameroonian rain forest.

The priest showed me into his study, where there was a small collection of books. As I browsed one shelf, I noticed a copy of the first edition of *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*. Naturally curious about why he had my book, I asked where he had obtained it. He told me he had studied for an advanced degree at one of the major Catholic institutions in Rome, where the book was

1. In light of the various contemporary uses of the word *evangelical*, I want to stress that I use it, not as a reference to churchgoers in the US with particular conservative cultural, religious, and political sensibilities, but in its more academic sense as a reference to the global body of Christians who emphasize scriptural authority, theological orthodoxy, evangelization and personal conversion to Christ, and a biblically shaped individual and corporate life characterized by devotion to Jesus and his way. That does not, however, mean that evangelicals are monolithic. My use of the term in this book corresponds largely to its use by scholars and publishers who self-identify as evangelical. (Note: in some parts of the world, *evangelical* means Protestant or Lutheran.)

assigned as a text. Now, back in his home country, he was using the book to teach Cameroonian seminarians—who had only two textbooks each, a Bible and a book of Catholic canon law—how to do exegesis so that they would be faithful scriptural interpreters.

The present edition has much in common with earlier editions, but it is also different. Every sentence of every paragraph has been reread and sometimes modified, either for greater clarity or to nuance what was there. New paragraphs and examples have been included on various topics, sometimes reflecting developments in the field or in my own thinking. The chapters with discussions of various interpretive approaches (including theological interpretation and missional hermeneutics), in particular, have been slightly revised and expanded. Furthermore, additional material on the importance of both the text's canonical context and the interpreter's social and ecclesial contexts has been included. In that regard, the book is more attentive to the global character of biblical interpretation. This focus is reflected in the inclusion, for the first time, of a sample paper from a student in the Majority World. Both this paper and a new sample exegetical summary page include theological and missional perspectives on the text. Finally, the section of resources for the various elements of exegesis has been updated and expanded, and it includes resources from the Majority World.

A note to readers (especially instructors): I recommend reading the introductions to the first and second editions too. They provide further context for the book, highlighting my goals in writing *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* as well as certain developments in biblical studies that have shaped the way this book presents the exegetical task. In addition, the introduction to the first edition offers suggestions for instructors.

Introduction to the Revised and Expanded Edition (2009)

Much has happened in the field of biblical studies since the original publication of this book. There have been archaeological discoveries and rumors of archaeological discoveries (ossuaries and tombs being among the most notable). There have been new skirmishes in the Bible wars, especially over the interpretation of certain ethical issues. Some new translations have appeared, and some methodologies of biblical study have been revamped or fine-tuned.

However, arguably the most important development in the field of biblical studies since the turn of the twenty-first century has been the turn (or, rather, return) to the *theological* interpretation of Scripture. This development expresses a deep desire on the part of many biblical scholars and theologians to explore and articulate ways of biblical interpretation that attend to the biblical text primarily as theological text, as vehicle of divine revelation and address. To many outside the theological guild but inside the church (and perhaps even outside it), such a focus is altogether self-evident and natural. To many inside the guild, however, years of exposure to nontheological interpretation have made reading the Bible as Scripture seem almost abnormal, and those of us who wish to change this bias are aware of the challenges before us as we attempt to move forward in the appropriately theological task of biblical interpretation.¹

1. This paragraph is drawn, with minor modifications, from the opening paragraph of my article “A ‘Seamless Garment’ Approach to Biblical Interpretation?” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1 (2007): 117–28.

Already discussed and embraced in the first edition of *Elements* (especially in chapters 1 and 8), theological interpretation receives much more attention in this edition, accounting for the most significant change: the considerable expansion and renaming of chapter 8. That chapter is now called, not merely “Reflection,” but “Reflection—Theological Interpretation.” Three points about these changes need to be made here.

First, theological interpretation does not own a particular exegetical method or methodology. Its practitioners can, and do, make use of a variety of methods. My own approach (expressed in this book) is still rather eclectic but largely synchronic, as discussed in chapter 1.

Second, the revised chapter 8 is longer and more theoretical than most of the other chapters, and deliberately so because of the subject matter. The chapter still makes practical suggestions, but it does so within a more fully developed framework than a purely nuts-and-bolts approach would do.

Third, despite the location of the extended discussion of theological interpretation near the end of the book, readers should not conclude that theological interpretation is an afterthought, or that it takes place only after all the real work of critical or scientific (historical and literary) exegesis is finished. Rather, theological interpretation involves an attitude, a *modus operandi*, and a goal (*telos*) that permeate the entire process. In sum, theological interpretation means reading the scriptural text as closely and carefully as possible, employing the best methodologies available, because theological interpreters believe that during and after that process they can hear God speak in and through the text.

This increased emphasis on theological interpretation does not in any way negate the basic historical and literary aspects of sound exegesis that any interpreter of the Bible needs to consider. In fact, interpreters who are not committed to a theological reading of the biblical texts will still profit from the basic approach and method advocated in this book. That is to say, whether one considers theological interpretation the main course or an unnecessary dessert, there are certain staples of an exegetical meal that are common to all careful readers of the Bible, and those staples constitute the building blocks both of this book and of any good exegetical method.

Another major addition to this edition is the inclusion of a much-needed sample exegesis paper on a text from the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. Other alterations to this edition are relatively minor but significant: changes to a few exercises, clarification and/or elaboration on several matters, and especially the addition of new resources. The purpose of the book, and its intended audience, remain the same: *Elements* provides students and ministers with an unapologetically practical approach to exegesis that is built on a strong theoretical foundation.

Introduction to the First Edition (2001)

Father Robert Leavitt, the president-rector [until 2007] of the institution I serve, is an avid golfer with a three handicap. After he returned from a summer golf school at the famous Pebble Beach golf course in California, he surprised me by saying that his class included students of all abilities, from beginners to near-pros like himself. When asked how the instructors could meet the needs of such a diverse class membership, he responded, “They taught the basics.” In fact, he said, that’s what they do when PGA pros return to Pebble Beach for off-season instruction: they go back to the basics.

Preventing Exegetical Illiteracy

This book is about basics, about fundamentals. Designed for students, teachers, pastors, and others wishing to think and write about the Bible carefully, it began as a guide for seminary students learning to do careful analysis of the New Testament for classes, ordination exams, and preaching. First presented to classes and to study groups preparing for ordination exams in the Presbyterian Church (some of whom had failed their first attempt at the exam, usually because they lacked a clear method!), the material proved to be a simple-to-learn and helpful tool. It was then put down in writing as a brief hands-on guide to biblical exegesis.

In 1990 the Council for Religion in Independent Schools published a form of the guide as *Texts and Contexts: A Guide to Careful Thinking and Writing about the Bible*, which served many students in various settings. A revised

edition, published first at St. Mary's Seminary & University, and then by Wipf & Stock Publishers, served hundreds of students at St. Mary's, with much success.

This book is a thoroughly revised work, though the basic principles of the method have remained the same even as I have tried to incorporate new insights from the never-static field of biblical interpretation. I am told that students are still failing exegesis exams, and I know from personal experience that much of today's preaching still reveals ignorance of the basic principles of exegesis.

This book is offered, therefore, for use at several levels and in several ways. The concepts and method are understandable to beginning Bible students in colleges, universities, pretheology programs, and seminaries. For these students, both the discussion of the method and the practice exercises at the end of each chapter are recommended. The book is useful as introductory or collateral reading in a course on the Bible or on any part of the Bible, or it can be given to students for independent reading and reference. Its use does not require, nor does it preclude, knowledge of the Bible's original languages.

For more experienced students and for ordained preachers, the discussion of a clear, logical method for studying the Bible may give them something they have not found elsewhere. Most biblical scholars use something like the method presented in this book in their own thinking, writing, and teaching, but I am afraid that this strategy is often not communicated methodically to students. My experience with pastors as well as seminary students has confirmed this hunch. Furthermore, many of the exegetical handbooks in print are too detailed and complex for most students and preachers to use on a regular basis. This book suggests how to read the biblical text carefully, whether one is preparing to discuss a passage in class, write an exegetical paper, or venture into the pulpit. It can thus be used as a reference in classes or seminars in biblical studies, exegesis, or homiletics. For seasoned preachers, this book will not so much provide tips on how to preach the text as it will offer advice (or reminders) about how to read the text more responsibly.

Cautions

Three words of caution may be in order before we begin. First, although the elements or steps are simple, mastering this process is not easy. It requires hard work and trial and error—but the hard work will pay off.

Second, I do not want to create the impression that I believe the method presented in this book is the only way to think and write about the Bible. There

are many other ways that can be used by the modern interpreter. The method presented here is for the basic but careful historical, literary, and theological analysis of a relatively short text, though its principles can apply to reading Scripture (and almost anything else) in general. The method presented here is chosen as the starting place by a wide variety of readers; it can also be useful to those who wish to supplement it with other interpretive strategies.

Third, therefore, this book is not intended to replace more detailed books on interpretation of the Bible, on specific literary genres, or on hermeneutics. I am convinced, however, that the already difficult task of biblical exegesis and interpretation is becoming so complex, with the unending array of new methods and methodologies (not to mention new historical discoveries), that many students and preachers are tempted to abandon any hope of being scholarly or even careful in their reading and use of the Bible. When that happens, students and preachers—not to mention the houses of worship and the general public—will (and do) suffer immense losses. This book is *deliberately* basic, not to curtail further study but to stimulate it and, in the meantime, to prevent disaster in the classroom and the pulpit. My agenda, therefore, is quite simple and straightforward: to help prevent exegetical illiteracy among everyday readers, teachers, and preachers of biblical texts.

Readers will notice that the length of the chapters varies considerably in proportion to the nature of the topic under consideration. The chapter “Detailed Analysis,” for example, is much longer than the very short chapter “Survey.” Readers will also notice that both sample exegesis papers, written by two of my students, are based on New Testament texts. That is solely because New Testament is the area in which I teach. [An Old Testament paper has been added for the revised and expanded edition.]

Suggestions for Instructors¹

1. It is beneficial to have students work through the entire text, both readings and exercises.
2. The book can be used in an introductory unit in a biblical studies course. Perhaps assign one element of the method per class, including at least one of the suggested exercises and the appropriate section on resources for expanding and refining that element. This results in a base unit of about eight classes for the students to work through the method. Then allow ample time for writing a draft and final copy of an exegetical

1. This section has been lightly edited for the third edition.

paper, perhaps in conjunction with the main biblical books read in the course. Alternatively, the text can be spaced out over a longer period of time, integrated with the course content.

3. Encourage students to think for themselves as they read the Bible. Emphasize the fact that all students, no matter what their background, can make a valuable contribution to the group's understanding of the Bible. One way to stress this is to assign a nonbiblical text, such as a newspaper editorial or excerpt from a historical document, for individual or class exegesis before beginning the study of the Bible.
4. Devote extra time to any section of this book that especially perplexes your students and, of course, to any section that *you* deem particularly important for your students. In my own view, the material on historical and literary contexts and on form, structure, and movement are crucial for all students to grasp, no matter their theological interests (or lack thereof).
5. In class, you may wish to have students discuss, and even defend, their answers to the exercises, or at least some of them. (It may be wise to indicate to students in advance which exercises will be discussed.) If time permits, do additional exercises together in class. The more students practice, the better their exegetical work will be.
6. Have students read the sections of the sample exegesis papers that correspond to each assignment, but only *after* reading the theory and doing the exercises themselves.
7. When assigning exegetical papers, start small, with perhaps an essay of three to four pages (1,000–1,250 words). Students may eventually be encouraged to write a substantial paper of 2,000–4,000 words or more, depending on the level of the course.

PART ONE

ORIENTATION

1

The Task

Take up and read, take up and read.

—A child at play, overheard
by Augustine, according
to the *Confessions* 8.12

And now the end has come. So listen to my piece of advice: exegesis, exegesis, and yet more exegesis!

—Karl Barth, in his farewell to his students
before his 1935 expulsion from Germany

What Is Exegesis?

Whether you are reading the Bible for the first time or you have been reading it since early childhood, there will be passages that seem nearly impossible to understand. There will also be passages that you *think* you understand but that your instructors, classmates, fellow church members, parishioners, or friends from other religious traditions or cultures interpret quite differently. These kinds of experiences occur when people read any kind of literature, but we become particularly aware of them when we read *religious* literature—literature that makes claims on us. As we know, the Bible is the all-time best seller, a book read, interpreted, and quoted by millions of people in countless ways. It would be easy to abandon any hope of understanding the Bible with some degree of confidence.

Such despair, however, is unnecessary. Although there are many approaches to the Bible, there is also a fair amount of common ground about biblical interpretation among responsible readers of the Bible. The purpose of this book is to help you read, think about, and write about the Bible carefully and systematically using some of these common strategies. Although it is useful for the study of a portion of the Bible of any size, this book is designed primarily for intense, precise study of a small section—a brief narrative, psalm, lament, prophetic oracle, speech, parable, miracle story, vision, or chapter-length argument, and so on—that consists of no more than several closely connected paragraphs. The technical term for such careful analysis of, and engagement with, a biblical text is *exegesis*, from the Greek verb *exēgeisthai*, meaning “to lead out” (*ex*, “out” + *hēgeisthai*, “to lead”). In this important and necessarily lengthy first chapter we consider the task of exegesis and survey the method proposed in this book.

Exegesis as Investigation, Conversation, and Art—in Context

Biblical exegesis may be defined as the careful historical, literary, and theological analysis and explanation of a text. Some would call it *scholarly reading* and describe it as reading in a way that “ascertains the sense of the text through the most complete, systematic recording possible of the phenomena of the text and grappling with the reasons that speak for or against a specific understanding of it.”¹ Another appropriate description of exegesis I find especially helpful is *close reading*, a term borrowed from the study of literature.² Close reading means the deliberate, word-by-word and phrase-by-phrase consideration of all the parts of a text in order to understand it as a whole. Biblical interpreters are not, therefore, the only type of exegete. Literary critics and lawyers, for example, also engage in close reading of texts. But for many readers of the Bible, scholarly, close readings are good but insufficient. For them, exegesis also means seriously engaging the subject matter of the text as a place to seek, and hopefully encounter, truth. Those who engage in the process of exegesis—as scholars, as close readers, as careful seekers after truth—are called *exegetes*.³

1. Wilhelm Egger, *How to Read the New Testament: An Introduction to Linguistic and Historical-Critical Methodology*, ed. Hendrikus Boers, trans. Peter Heinegg (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 3.

2. Some people, however, use the term *close reading* to mean an approach that completely ignores issues of authorship and historical context. As will become clear later, this is not the meaning of close reading promoted here.

3. Exegetes should resist the temptation to create a new verb, *to exegete*, as in “to exegete a text.” According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, *exegete* is only a noun. The adjectival form of *exegete* is *exegetical*.

Many people over the years have understood the goal of exegesis to be the discovery of the biblical writer's purpose in writing, what is called the *authorial intent*. While a laudable goal, this is often difficult to achieve. It can be hard enough to grasp our own intentions in writing something, let alone those of another person from another time and culture.⁴ Many interpreters today reject authorial intent as the goal of exegesis. A more modest and appropriate primary goal would be to achieve *a credible and coherent understanding of the text on its own terms and in its own context*. Even that goal is a difficult one. This primary objective is often, though not always, pursued with a larger (and ultimately more important) existential goal—that somehow the text in its context may speak to us in our different-yet-similar context.

Exegesis as Investigation

Exegesis is therefore an *investigation*. It is an investigation of the many dimensions, or textures, of a particular text. It is a process of asking questions of a text, questions that are often provoked by the text itself. As one of my professors in seminary used to put it, the basic question we are always asking is, “What’s going on here?” In some ways, that question is enough, but it will be helpful to flesh it out, to give this basic question some greater form and substance. Markus Bockmuehl, an Oxford professor, asks his students to consider the context, content, and contribution of a text.⁵ Accordingly, exegetes must learn to probe, to love asking questions.

To engage in exegesis is to ask historical questions of a text, such as, “What situation seems to have been the occasion for the writing of this text?” Exegesis also means asking literary questions of the text, such as, “What kind of literature is this text, and what are its literary, or rhetorical, aims?” (*Rhetoric* is the art of effective communication.) Furthermore, exegesis means asking questions about the religious, or theological, dimensions of the text, such as, “With what great theological question or issue does this text engage, and what claims on its readers does it make?” Exegesis means not being afraid of difficult questions, such as, “Why does this text seem to contradict that one?” Finally, exegesis means not fearing discovery of something new or puzzlement over something apparently insoluble. Sometimes doing exegesis means

4. Though always difficult, the pursuit of authorial intent may be wiser, simpler, and more appropriate in certain situations. For instance, the task may be a bit easier if you are reading part of a letter known to be from Paul than if you are considering a passage (say, in 2 Kings) whose author is unknown.

5. See Markus Bockmuehl, “A Rough Guide to NT Gobbets,” New Testament @ the University of Oxford, last modified March 2017, <https://ntatoxford.com/a-rough-guide-to-nt-gobbets>. (A *gobbet* is a small portion or clump—a *gob*—of meat, some other substance, or text.)

learning to ask the right questions, even if the questions are not immediately resolved. In fact, exegesis may lead to greater ambiguity in our understanding of the text itself, of its meaning for us, or both.

Exegesis as Conversation

It would be a mistake, however, to think that we are the first or the only people to raise these questions of the biblical text as we seek to analyze and engage it carefully. Exegesis may also be defined as a *conversation*. It is a conversation with readers living and dead, more learned and less learned, absent and present. It is a conversation about texts and their contexts, about sacred words and their claims—and the claims others have made about them. As conversation, exegesis entails listening to others, even others with whom we disagree. It is a process best carried out in the company of other people through reading and talking with them—carefully, critically, and creatively—about texts. The isolated reader is not the ideal biblical exegete.

Nevertheless, we often read the Bible alone, whether by choice or by virtue of our vocation. Students are normally required to write exegesis papers on their own. Pastors and other ministers usually prepare and preach sermons or homilies, grounded in careful study of the text (we hope), on their own. Whatever outside resources students or ministers may or may not consult, they need a method for the careful study of their chosen or assigned text. They need a way to enter the ongoing conversation about this or that text with confidence and competence, so that they too may contribute to the conversation. Hence the need for an exegetical method.

Exegesis as Art

The word *method*, however, should not be equated precisely with *scientific method* or *historical method*. Good reading—like good conversation or any sort of good investigation—is an art more than it is a science. Exegesis, as we will see throughout this book, is therefore an *art*. To be sure, there are certain principles and elements to consider, but knowing what to ask of a text, what to think about a text, and what to say about a text can never be accomplished with complete certainty or done with method alone. Rather, an exegete needs not only principles, rules, hard work, and research skills, but also intuition, imagination, sensitivity, and even a bit of serendipity on occasion.

The task of exegesis requires, therefore, enormous intellectual and even spiritual energy. In fact, as Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (HB/OT) scholar William Brown puts it, good exegesis is “a practice of empathy, wonder, and

hospitality.”⁶ The results, he rightly claims, can be both transformative and joyful. Many people experience this art, therefore, as a rewarding spiritual discipline. This has certainly been true for most of the great biblical interpreters in both Judaism and Christianity. As the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* tells us, Scripture is something to “hear . . . , read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest.”

Exegesis and Context

Finally, it is critical to note that exegesis does not occur in a vacuum. We read *in context*, indeed in multiple contexts. Our personal, religious, ecclesial (church), social, economic, ethnic, racial, historical, and geographical contexts all affect what we see when we read a text, and that is actually a good thing. Different vistas on the same scriptural passage are normal, even if the interpreters follow a similar method. In fact, different interpretations are both healthy and helpful; such is the nature of good conversation. C. S. Lewis tells us that “what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing; it also depends on what sort of person you are.”⁷ We become better interpreters when we recognize our own contexts and appreciate the contexts of others.

Elizabeth Mburu, an African biblical scholar, suggests that biblical interpretation is a four-legged stool consisting of the four contexts of any text: historical and cultural, literary, theological, and what we might call contemporary—meaning, for her, parallels to the African context. Interestingly, Mburu says that these four contexts should be considered in reverse order from the way I have listed them. That is, parallels in African life (whether about marriage, ancestors, shame, good and evil, etc.) are the first context because interpreters can then move from the known to the unknown.⁸ At the same time, because exegesis is also simultaneously an investigation, it is not a free-for-all conversation in which supposed contemporary parallels to ancient texts go unexamined or unchallenged. Nor can texts mean anything we want them to mean by forcing our contexts or perspectives onto the Bible. Our own context contributes to our interpretation, but it does not possess unchecked power and authority (a point Mburu strongly emphasizes).

6. William P. Brown, *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 9.

7. C. S. Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 125 (in chap. 10, “The First Joke and Other Matters”). The provocative latter part of this quote raises important questions about the character—not just the context—of the interpreter. (I owe this reference to Professor Joel Green.)

8. Elizabeth Mburu, *African Hermeneutics* (Cumbria, UK: Langham, 2019), 65–90. Mburu calls *application* the “seat” (i.e., goal) of the four legs.

Summary: Exegesis Is . . .

Exegesis, then, is investigation, conversation, and art—in context. As conversation and art that takes place in particular contexts, and in collaboration with interpreters in different contexts (past and present), exegesis requires an openness to others and to the text that method alone cannot provide. However, without a method, exegesis is no longer an investigation. Thus the principal focus of this book is on developing an exegetical method.

Choosing an Approach to the Task

Handbooks on studying the Bible and on exegetical method are plentiful. Some are simplistic, others incredibly complex. The method of exegesis presented in the following pages is neither. It may be similar to methods you have learned for reading and writing explications of poetry or other literature. For example, as a student of French in high school and college, I learned how to examine French literature closely, just as students in France do. The process, and the result, was called an *explication de texte*. As noted above, this way of carefully reading a small portion of literature is sometimes known as *close reading*. If you have never learned such a method, this book will also help you to be a more careful reader of literature in general.

The approach to exegesis advocated in this book is grounded in the conviction that we can read a text responsibly only if we attempt to understand the unique setting (the historical context) in which it was produced and in which it is situated (the literary context and, for many readers, also the canonical context⁹).

Furthermore, we can understand a text only if we pay careful attention to both the whole and the parts (details), to the proverbial forest as well as the trees. Before considering in depth the approach to exegesis proposed in this book, we need to understand something about the options available. In order to do that, we must become familiar with some rather technical terms.

Exegesis can be, in fact, a very technical field of inquiry. Interpreters of the Bible employ a variety of general approaches and specific methods to understand and engage the text. Some of these methods are called *criticisms*. The use of the term *criticism*, as in *redaction criticism*, does not necessarily imply negative judgment; the primary meaning of the term is *analysis*, though it may also mean judgment—whether negative, positive, or both—about the historical, literary, or theological value of a text.

9. The word *canon* refers to the entire contents of the Bible. The canonical context is the place of a text in the Bible seen as a whole, as one book.

Two Main Approaches to Exegesis

Today there are two main approaches to biblical exegesis, which we will call the *analytical* approach and the *engaged* approach.¹⁰ An analytical approach is fundamentally a *modern* way of studying texts that seeks to understand them in terms of their historical development, their literary features, or both. This sort of approach is a product of the Enlightenment and its aftermath in the West. It does not require (nor does it necessarily rule out) an interest in the text as something more than a historical artifact or literary work to analyze and explain as such.¹¹

An engaged approach, on the other hand, is fundamentally a *postmodern* way of interpreting biblical texts that seeks to engage them as something more than historical and literary objects.¹² (The art of interpretation in this sense is called *hermeneutics*.) This is not to say that interpreters who focus on the historical and literary dimensions of the text are apathetic about their work; rather, by an *engaged* approach, I mean that the interpreter has a personal, vested interest in the text and its interpretation. There are many varieties of this sort of approach to exegesis, and sometimes (as we will see) a postmodern methodology has a lot in common with *premodern* methods of scriptural interpretation from the early and medieval Christian eras, which were always fully engaged ways of reading.

What I am calling the analytical approach is often said to be interested in the world *behind* the text (historical-critical emphasis) or the world *within* the text (literary-critical emphasis), whereas an engaged approach is concerned about the world *in front of* the text—the world the text creates, or could create, for its interpreters.¹³

We will first consider the two main forms of the analytical approach to biblical exegesis, and then consider three main types of the engaged approach.

Analytical Approaches to Exegesis

The Diachronic Approach: The World behind the Text

The first analytical approach to exegesis we will consider is the *diachronic* (meaning “across time”) approach. It focuses on the world behind a text, meaning the origin and development of that text. Accordingly, it employs

10. William Brown refers to “analytical” approaches and “readings in place”—approaches to the Bible from a particular context or perspective (Brown, *Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis*). Previous editions of the present book referred to the engaged approach as the *existential* approach.

11. It is true, however, that some modern interpreters do in fact bracket out faith commitments from biblical interpretation.

12. Postmodern thought places heavy emphasis on people’s particular contexts and perspectives.

13. These ways of reading are also sometimes referred to as author-centered (world behind), text-centered (world within), and reader-centered (world in front of) strategies.

methods designed to uncover these aspects of the text. The diachronic approach takes the long view of a text; it may be compared to a longitudinal perspective of a plant stem in a biology textbook. As a constellation of criticisms, this approach is often referred to as the *historical-critical method*, and it was the approach of choice for many, if not most, biblical scholars of the twentieth century. Many people will be familiar with one aspect of the historical-critical method: interest in the hypothetical sources of the Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy), called J, E, D, and P, or in the hypothetical source Q of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).¹⁴

This book will give some, but limited, attention to the so-called historical-critical methods of exegesis. They include the following:¹⁵

- **textual criticism**—the quest to ascertain the original wording of the text (and the ways later scribes accidentally or deliberately altered it)
- **historical linguistics**—the quest to understand words, idioms, grammatical forms, and the relationships among these items, often with attention to their historical development within a language
- **form criticism**—the quest to detect the original type of oral or written tradition reflected in the text, and the sort of situation in the life of Israel or the early church out of which such a tradition might have developed¹⁶
- **tradition criticism**—the quest to understand the growth of a tradition over time, from its original oral or written form to its incorporation into the final text
- **source criticism**—the quest to determine the oral and written sources used in the text
- **redaction criticism**—the quest to perceive the ways in which the final author of the text purposefully adopted and adapted sources
- **historical criticism**—the quest to ascertain the events that surrounded the production of the text, including the purported events narrated by the text itself¹⁷

14. On these matters, consult any introductory Old Testament or New Testament text, or see “The Scriptures of Israel (the Christian Old Testament)” by Claire Mathews McGinnis and “The Writings of the New Covenant (the New Testament)” by Michael J. Gorman, in Michael J. Gorman, ed., *Scripture and Its Interpretation: A Global, Ecumenical Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 45–71, 72–96.

15. For an overview of the various criticisms and the questions they seek to answer, see the tables in appendix A.

16. The technical term for this phenomenon (the “situation”), though it is now less widely used, is the German phrase *Sitz im Leben* (“setting in life”).

17. I am using the term *historical criticism* in a rather general way to encompass the investigation of what has often been called the *occasion* of a document’s writing as well as any other

A diachronic approach to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) might ask questions such as the following:

- What written or oral sources did the evangelist (Gospel writer) adopt, adapt, and combine to compose this “sermon”?
- What are the various components of the Sermon (beatitudes, prayers, parables, pithy sayings, etc.), and what is their origin and development in Jewish tradition, the ministry of the earthly Jesus, and/or the life of the early church?
- What does the evangelist’s use of sources reveal about his theological interests?
- To what degree do these teachings represent the words or ideas of the historical Jesus?

There are some critics of the diachronic method who want to retain its historical emphasis but find the presuppositions of some of its practitioners (e.g., those who deny the possibility of miracles or the role of God’s Spirit in the production of the Bible) inappropriate for the study of Scripture. They might propose a modified historical-critical method, one that accepts some of the goals of the method but not its “alien” aspects. One such scholar proposed using the term *historical biblical criticism*.¹⁸

Practitioners of the diachronic approach are also interested in some of the questions raised by advocates of a more synchronic approach to the text (discussed below). They may, for example, combine rhetorical criticism with more traditional historical-critical methods. Indeed, few exegetes today are “pure” practitioners of a diachronic approach.

The Synchronic Approach: The World within the Text

The other analytical approach to exegesis is called *synchronic* (meaning “with[in] time,” i.e., “same time”; cf. *synchronize*). This approach may be compared to a cross section of a plant stem depicted in a biology textbook. It looks only at what scholars call *the final form of the text*, the text as it stands in the Bible as we have it. It is not interested in the long view or prehistory of the text—any oral traditions, earlier versions, or possible written sources.

historical events related to the genesis, development, production, and background of the text under investigation. In this sense, *historical criticism* and *social-scientific criticism* are closely related but differ in emphasis. (See further discussion in note 21 below.)

18. Karl P. Donfried, “Alien Hermeneutics and the Misappropriation of Scripture,” in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 22–25.

Rather, it is interested in the world—the words, images, references to history and culture—within the text we have.

Accordingly, the synchronic approach uses methods designed to analyze the text itself and the text in relation to the world in which it first existed as a text. The most common labels for this sort of approach are narrative-critical, rhetorical, social-scientific, and socio-rhetorical. Socio-rhetorical criticism, for example, may be defined as an approach that “integrates the ways people use language with the ways they live in the world.”¹⁹

This book will devote significant attention to synchronic methods of exegesis, but without a lot of the technical language that sometimes accompanies the discussion of these methods. They include the following:²⁰

- **lexical, grammatical, and syntactical analysis**—the quest to understand the text’s vocabulary (words and idioms), its grammatical forms, and the relationships among these items (syntax) according to the norms of usage at the time the text was produced
- **semantic or discourse analysis**—the quest to understand the ways in which a text conveys meaning through relationships among the parts, using modern principles and theories of linguistics
- **literary criticism**—the quest to understand the text as literature by using either traditional or more recent models of literary criticism that are employed in the study of literature generally
- **genre and form analysis**—as a corollary of literary criticism, the quest to classify a text according to its larger type (genre) or smaller type (form) and to determine its structure and movement
- **narrative criticism**—as a subset of literary criticism, the quest to understand the formal and material features of narrative texts (stories) or other texts that have an implicit or underlying narrative within or behind them, with attention to thematic aspects, plot, character development, point of view, etc.
- **rhetorical criticism**—the quest to understand the devices, strategies, and structures employed in the text to persuade or otherwise affect the reader, as well as the overall goals or effects of those rhetorical features
- **intertextual analysis**—the quest to determine the biblical texts, other texts, and extratextual realities that are quoted, alluded to, or echoed in the text

19. Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 1.

20. For a more inclusive overview of the various criticisms and the questions they seek to answer, see the tables in appendix A.

- **social-scientific criticism**—the quest to ascertain the social identity, perceptions of the world, and cultural characteristics of the writers, readers/hearers, and communities suggested by the text; usually divided into two distinct subdisciplines, **social description** and **social-scientific analysis**²¹

It should be noted that many advocates of a primarily synchronic approach to texts also incorporate some of the methods of diachronic exegesis discussed above.

If the terms listed above and the methods to which they refer seem at first foreign or complex, readers should bear in mind that they have probably already encountered them in the study of literature. The synchronic approach to Scripture is quite similar to the way in which literary critics analyze a poem or other short text. Literary critics, when explicating a poem, for example, may consider the following features:

- **genre and implied situation**—the type of literature the text represents, and the concrete life situation implied by the text
- **intellectual core**—the topic and theme (slant) of the text
- **structure and unity**—the arrangement of the text
- **literary** (e.g., poetic) **texture**—the details of the text
- **artistry**—the beauty of the text²²

As we will see, these features are all very similar to the elements of exegesis presented in this book.

A synchronic approach to the Sermon on the Mount might ask questions such as the following:

- What are the various sections of the Sermon, and how do they fit together to make a literary whole?

21. The questions asked and methods used in this type of biblical criticism are often those of the social sciences, such as sociology and anthropology. Some scholars would suggest that social-scientific criticism is not truly a synchronic method but is rather a new approach to traditional questions of historical criticism (described above as a diachronic method), which has been concerned broadly with the historical genesis and context (background) of biblical documents. For our purposes, we may say that the primary difference between the two criticisms is one of emphasis. The emphasis of social-scientific criticism is on describing and analyzing the social setting contemporary with the biblical text, while the emphasis of historical criticism is on reconstructing the historical developments that led to the production of the biblical text.

22. Adapted from Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 207–11. Similarly, the standard parts of an *explication de texte* in French literature are situation, form, subject, analysis, and conclusion.

- What does the narrator of this Gospel communicate by indicating the setting of the Sermon, the composition of the audience before and after the Sermon, and the audience's reaction to it?
- Which scriptural (HB/OT) texts are quoted or echoed in the Sermon, and what is the significance of these quotations and echoes?
- What is the function of the Sermon in the Gospel of Matthew's portrayal of Jesus and of discipleship?
- How would a first-century reader or hearer understand and be affected by the Sermon?

If taken together, the focus of investigation in the two basic analytical approaches to exegesis—diachronic and synchronic—is twofold: the world *behind* the text, and the world *of* or *within* the text. That is, exegetes who investigate the text with these methods are analysts of the historical and literary features of a biblical passage. There is clearly some overlap in the two approaches. For example, practitioners of both approaches are interested in the historical or sociopolitical contexts in which texts came to life and in the kind of literature texts are.

Engaged Approaches to Exegesis: The World in Front of the Text—and More

The historical and literary dimensions of a text are not, however, the only possible focal points of biblical exegesis. Some interpreters want to focus on the world *in front of* the text, the world that the text creates, or might create, and the interpreters' role in that new creation. This emphasis does not mean that such interpreters have no interest in the historical or literary aspects of the text, but they have a different priority. The analytical (diachronic and synchronic) approaches are generally seen as modern methodologies looking for ways to understand the text that do not depend on a particular religious or political perspective and do not have any inherent existential significance. On the other hand, approaches that prioritize the world *in front of* the text invite interpreters to name and utilize their particular perspectives. Such self-revelation reflects postmodern sensibilities (and, in many ways, ancient ones).

This second sort of basic approach to exegesis goes by a variety of names. We are calling it the *engaged* approach. We might also refer to it as a *perspectival* or even *participatory* approach because interpreters utilizing this kind of approach to exegesis generally wish to participate in the reality to

which the text and its interpretation point.²³ Proponents of this approach to biblical exegesis are primarily interested not in the text as an end in itself—whether understood in terms of its formation (diachronically) or its final form (synchronically)—but in the text as something to be engaged. Diachronic and even synchronic approaches often understand methods as ends in themselves, and can therefore keep the text at an existential distance; a biblical passage is something to analyze, or even dissect. Engaged, or participatory, approaches, on the other hand, employ the methods developed by diachronic and synchronic approaches, as well as their own distinctive methods, as instruments that enable the pursuit of greater ends. The methods employed therefore allow the biblical text itself to be read as a means to an end, not merely as an end in itself. Analysis is performed to enable something greater.

The end, or goal, of this kind of reading is often an encounter with a reality beyond the text to which the text bears witness. This “something beyond” may be a set of relations among people, a contemporary social or political situation or experience, a spiritual truth beyond the literal truth, the living God, and so on. The exegete may desire either to embrace or to resist the reality, depending on the nature of the reality perceived and encountered. Those who approach the text fundamentally to encounter God through the mediation of the text may refer to this approach as *theological* and *transformative*.

The engaged, or participatory, approach to exegesis, then, is *self-involving*;²⁴ readers do not treat the text as a historical or literary artifact but as something to engage experientially—something that could or should affect their

23. Choosing an appropriate label for this approach is difficult, and none is completely satisfactory. Other options, all of which have limitations of their own, include *self-involving*, *invested*, *application-oriented*, *pragmatic*, *instrumental*, *interactive*, *transformative*, *existential* (the term used in earlier editions of this book), and *hermeneutical*. (As we will see, the main engaged approach considered in this book is *theological*, and though it is tempting to use that label here, theological interpretation can be seen as part of a wider approach to reading texts.) Three points of clarification about the term *engaged*, and the concept it represents, are in order. First of all, some practitioners of exegesis, more narrowly understood, would argue that engaged exegesis is not exegesis at all but *interpretation*, or the task of *hermeneutics* (the technical term for interpretation). This argument often incorrectly assumes that diachronic (and perhaps also synchronic) approaches are objective or scientific while engaged readings are biased. In fact, however, all reading is biased, and the methods chosen affect both what is observed and which conclusions are drawn. Second (to repeat a point made in the text), using the term *engaged* in no way implies that diachronic and synchronic interpreters are less involved, less serious, or less competent; they simply have different fundamental purposes in their reading. Finally, the engaged approach to exegesis has likely been the main one used by the majority of Bible readers throughout history, with the possible exception of some professional biblical scholars of the last two centuries or so. Its legitimacy is, nonetheless, still questioned by some professional biblical scholars, while others advocate it vigorously.

24. For a use of this concept that rescues it from the privatistic inclinations of philosophical and theological existentialism, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*:

lives. The text is taken seriously with respect to human existence now, both individual existence and life in community (the private self and the corporate self). Powerful texts in general, and religious texts in particular, have the ability to create an alternative world and to invite their readers to engage it—to participate in it. Put differently, readers understand themselves to be entering a conversation with the text as they participate in what theological interpreter Joel Green calls a *communicative event*: “every engaged reading is already participation in a communicative event whereby we join in the generation of meaning and are shaped in the give and take of active discourse.”²⁵ Furthermore, by using methods that allow their own engaged participation in the exegesis, readers who take this approach deliberately enlarge the contexts within which the biblical text is read to include (for example) the entire canon, Jewish and Christian tradition, and contemporary religious or political circumstances.²⁶

We may divide the engaged-perspectival-participatory approach into three main types, although they sometimes intersect with one another. We will briefly consider them here and return later in the book to one of them (theological interpretation, or theological exegesis).²⁷

Ideological Criticism, or Advocacy Hermeneutics

Ideological criticism, or advocacy hermeneutics (interpretation), is exegesis with the goal of addressing and advancing a particular political, social, or ethical agenda, often by people who have been marginalized. Practitioners of ideological criticism see the text (or the way the text has generally been interpreted) as a witness to relations of power that can be harmful, especially to certain groups of marginalized people. Often using social-scientific methods, they seek to uncover and eventually to disarm the relations of oppressive power that they believe biblical texts (or their misguided interpreters) both signify and sanction. A text is read and then unread as a means of naming and being freed from oppression, and of attending to peoples thought to be disenfranchised by the Bible or its interpreters. This approach includes

The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading, 20th anniv. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 272–307, 564–66, 615–18.

25. Joel B. Green, “Discourse Theory and New Testament Interpretation,” in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, 2nd ed., ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 219–20.

26. For an overview of some engaged methods, see the tables in appendix A. For the topic of expanded contexts in theological exegesis, see the discussion in chapter 8, including figure 8.1.

27. In these approaches, terms like *exegesis*, *criticism*, *hermeneutics*, and *interpretation* are generally synonymous. For an accessible discussion of these various types, see chapters 10–19 of Gorman, *Scripture and Its Interpretation*.

- **liberationist exegesis**—exegesis done in the context of the struggle against unequal power relations and injustice, and for justice or liberation
- **feminist exegesis**—liberationist exegesis on behalf of women generally
- **womanist exegesis**—liberationist exegesis on behalf of women of color
- **postcolonial criticism**—exegesis intended to expose and critique the impact of colonialism, empire, and other power structures on both people and biblical interpretation
- **ecological hermeneutics**—exegesis with the goal of promoting ecological responsibility
- **disability hermeneutics**—exegesis with attention to people with disabilities
- **queer hermeneutics**—exegesis with attention to LGBTQIA persons

Contextual Exegesis, including Intercultural Hermeneutics

As noted earlier in this chapter, all exegesis is contextual. What I mean here by *contextual exegesis*, however, is exegesis done deliberately in and for a particular ethnic, cultural, social, or geographical context.²⁸ Like ideological criticism (advocacy hermeneutics), contextual exegesis is also concerned with specific political, social, and economic realities. It is often also attentive to the realities of hybridity (the mixing of cultures), migration, discrimination, and cultural or religious minority status. It especially includes

- various forms of **African hermeneutics**
- various forms of **Asian hermeneutics**—for instance, Chinese, South Asian, Dalit²⁹
- various forms of **indigenous peoples hermeneutics**—for instance, Native American (in the US), First Nation (in Canada), and Maori (in New Zealand)
- various forms of the **hermeneutics of people characterized by cultural hybridity**—for instance, Latin American, African American, Asian American, and Hispanic/Latinx (Latino/Latina)
- **intercultural hermeneutics**

28. This sort of exegesis is sometimes called *vernacular hermeneutics*, which places heavy emphasis on the local experience of the particular interpreters.

29. The word *Dalit* means “broken” or “oppressed” and refers to the lowest members of the caste system of India and Nepal.

An important development of contextual exegesis, intercultural hermeneutics can also be considered a form of theological interpretation and of its subdiscipline missional hermeneutics, discussed below. Intercultural hermeneutics involves assembling people from diverse cultures to read Scripture together from their particular contexts. Despite its technical name, this is biblical interpretation, not primarily for scholars, but especially for ordinary readers interpreting in small communities. The goal is to understand others, to reexamine preconceptions about both others and Scripture in a nonthreatening way, and to seek reconciliation.

Theological Interpretation, or Theological Exegesis

The most ancient engaged approach to exegesis is *theological interpretation*, or *theological exegesis*, which has been undergoing a great revival in recent years. Its subject matter is not merely the world in front of the text, but the world—the reality—of God (Greek *theos*) witnessed in the text. It is not issue-centered but God-centered, and its primary context (without ignoring other contexts) is ecclesial: the people of God, or the church (Greek *ekklēsia*).³⁰ The theological interpretation of Scripture is sometimes called a *confessional* approach to interpretation. Because of its importance in this book, we will discuss it here at some length, and at still greater length in chapter 8.

Practitioners of theological exegesis read the text primarily as a reliable vehicle of, source of, or witness to God’s revelation and will, which are discerned especially in communal reading and conversation. These interpreters read the Bible as a means of religious formation, both attitudinal and behavioral, experiencing the exegetical process, in some sense, as a means of encountering God. This approach may make use of any or all of the diachronic and synchronic methods, but it also often involves expanding both the contexts within which the text is read and the kinds of methods used. This is because the biblical text is understood as more than a historical artifact or literary work; it is viewed as sacred text, as Scripture.

Theological interpreters of Scripture often do their work in conversation with systematic theologians or within specific religious traditions (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, evangelical, etc.). Increasingly, however, theological interpreters recognize the importance of everyday interpreters in local congregations too.

Theological exegetes may also take into account the perceived purposes of God—the divine mission (the *missio Dei*³¹)—in salvation history, the in-

30. Although the primary focus of this book will be Christian theological interpretation, which is ecclesial, or church-centered, theological exegesis also occurs within Jewish contexts.

31. This Latin phrase for “the mission of God” has become a technical term in theology.

carnation, or the paschal mystery (the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus) as contexts for interpretation. Practitioners of *missional hermeneutics* specifically read the biblical text as witness to God's purposes in the world and as invitation to participate in that divine activity.

Theological exegetes often practice some form of *canonical criticism* by taking into account the canonical context—the place of the text in the entire Bible as the religious community's book—whereas a purely diachronic or historical-critical approach would find that practice anachronistic, since the entire Bible did not exist as one book when a particular biblical document was composed.³² They may also appeal to tradition or the rule of faith (i.e., the confessional framework of orthodox belief, such as the Nicene Creed) as the context for and guide to appropriate exegesis. In each case, theological interpretation enlarges the context of biblical interpretation beyond a text's immediate historical and literary context to include the church's canon and (often) its confession, as well as the contemporary context of the interpreters.

Further, advocates of theological exegesis sometimes appeal to *premodern* Jewish and Christian ways of reading the Bible that allow for a variety of meanings in the text. These additional ways yield interpretations that are sometimes referred to as spiritual or figural rather than literal. A figural (or figurative) reading is one in which one name or thing is taken to refer to something else. For example, the defeat of the Canaanites narrated in the HB/OT has for centuries been interpreted as the conquering of one's sins. Today, the Gospels' exorcism accounts are frequently preached as meaning liberation from a spiritual condition or an addiction.

There is currently an important revival of interest among biblical scholars and theologians in what is termed the *fourfold sense of Scripture*.³³ This medieval way of reading the Bible insisted that scriptural texts had several meanings (generally three) in addition to the literal or plain sense. These senses corresponded to doctrine, ethics, and the hope of heaven. Although the methods currently used differ from their medieval counterparts, the questions asked by the methods are fundamentally the same, corresponding to

32. The term *canonical criticism* is associated with the work of Brevard Childs. My use of it here is more general (to mean *canonical analysis*), rather than a reference to a specific scholar.

33. It should be noted that some contemporary theological exegetes zealously advocate the overthrow of most modern or critical, especially historical-critical, approaches to the Bible (those developed largely since the Enlightenment) in favor of premodern (pre-Enlightenment) exegesis. Such ancient methods (including figural reading of the text) had their appropriate pride of place in their day, and they still have much to teach us, as we will see later in this book. We should not, however, simply return to premodern ways of reading and ignore the contributions of modern scholarship and the sorts of questions it requires us to consider.

the three Christian theological virtues of faith, love, and hope: What are we to believe (faith), to do (love), and to expect (hope)?³⁴

A less academic variation of theological exegesis is the ancient and revered practice of spiritual reading, or *lectio divina* (literally, divine or sacred reading). In some circles this term may be unfamiliar, but similar practices may be called devotional reading. *Lectio divina* is an approach to reading the Bible that uses contemplation and meditation in the context of prayer to encounter God and to hear God’s word to the individual or community. Since the goal of spiritual reading is contemplation and formation (spiritual growth), not information or analysis, exegetical methods might seem superfluous—but they are not. Meditation on a text means “chewing on it”³⁵ and requires asking questions of the text that are similar to the ones asked by exegetes who use synchronic, and even some diachronic, methods.

Finally, many recent approaches to the Bible stress that, since the ultimate goal of biblical exegesis is not information but transformation, true exegesis is accomplished only when individuals and communities engage in the *embodiment* or *actualization* of the text. The reading community, we might say, is to become a *living exegesis* of the text. (I will have more to say about all of this in chapter 8.)

To summarize, theological exegesis includes the following:

- **canonical criticism**—which is exegesis done in the context of the Bible as a whole
- **interpretation in conversation with systematic theology**
- **exegesis that is specific to a theological tradition** (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, evangelical, etc.)
- **congregational hermeneutics**—which focuses on everyday interpretation
- **missional hermeneutics**—which uses the mission of God (the *missio Dei*) and of God’s people as the chief interpretive lens
- **interpretation with guidance from the rule of faith and premodern interpreters**

34. The three additional medieval senses are generally labeled allegorical (concerning doctrine), tropological (concerning behavior), and anagogical (concerning the future hope). For an introductory discussion, see Carole Monica C. Burnett, “Premodern Interpretation of the Bible,” in Gorman, *Scripture and Its Interpretation*, 168–86.

35. See, for example, M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 114. Mulholland outlines six steps for *lectio divina*: *silencio* (silent preparation), *lectio* (receptive reading), *meditatio* (processing), *oratio* (heartfelt, responsive prayer), *contemplatio* (self-abandonment to God and God’s will), and *incarnatio* (living the text).

- **spiritual (or sacred) reading** (traditionally called *lectio divina*)
- **embodiment or actualization**—which is exegesis in the sense of appropriating and embodying the text in the world

Further Aspects of Engaged Approaches

It is important to note that the three types of engaged exegesis described above are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they often overlap. For instance, a Hispanic/Latinx exegesis of a text often has robustly theological and spiritual, as well as strongly liberationist, goals and results. Similarly, an African interpretation will often reveal a postcolonial approach that is also deeply theological and spiritual. And a missional interpretation must attend to the interpreters' context.

Each type of engaged approach to reading texts challenges the ideologies of education and knowledge that have been pervasive in the West since the Enlightenment. Such ideologies tend to equate knowledge and education with the acquisition of information. Engaged, perspectival, participatory, transformative approaches to knowledge and education are at least equally interested in the formation of a certain kind of people. This kind of knowing is sometimes called *embodied knowing*. It will ring true to those who have theological or other engaged interests in studying the Bible.

An engaged-perspectival-participatory approach to the text might ask the following kinds of questions of the Sermon on the Mount:

- To what kind of faith and practice does the Sermon call contemporary readers? (theological)
- What spiritual practices are necessary in order for individuals and churches to live the message of the Sermon in the contemporary world? (theological)
- Does love of enemies rule out the use of resistance or violence in every situation? What does it mean *practically* to embody the teachings about nonviolence in the Sermon, especially in the face of abuses committed by the powerful against the marginalized, such as the innocent poor of a Latin American country? (theological, ideological/advocacy, contextual)
- How might the text about turning the other cheek (Matt. 5:39) be a potential source of difficulty or even oppression for the politically or socially downtrodden, such as minorities in the Western context? (contextual, ideological/advocacy)

Readers who approach the text in this way use diverse methods and have a wide variety of goals and agendas. Their various contexts and approaches

significantly affect the results of exegesis. Both diachronic and synchronic methods can (indeed, must) be appropriated. Practitioners of engaged exegesis judge the adequacy of any specific method on the basis of its ability to assist in achieving the overall goal of exegesis—its *telos*. This goal may be described as something rather general, such as transformation or spiritual formation, or as something more specific, such as liberation or an encounter with the living God.

The following table provides a brief summary of these various approaches to exegesis. (A more detailed table appears in appendix A.) The table summarizes what we have already considered: there are broad differences between the analytical approaches and the engaged approaches, and there are also significant differences between the first two engaged approaches (especially ideological criticism) and the last (theological interpretation).

Types of Exegesis

	Analytical approaches		Engaged approaches		
Specific type	Diachronic (historical-critical method)	Synchronic	Ideological criticism, or advocacy hermeneutics	Contextual exegesis	Theological interpretation
Character of methods	modern	modern	postmodern	postmodern	postmodern, premodern
Subject of concern	the world behind the text	the world within the text	the world in front of the text	the world in front of the text	the reality of God witnessed by the text
Central focus	author(s) or source(s)	final form of the text	particular issue	interpreter’s context	God, church, world

A Hermeneutic of Trust or Suspicion?

One final aspect of an interpreter’s approach to the Bible needs to be considered, and that is the question of basic attitude. This basic attitude, or fundamental interpretive posture, can take one of two forms: either trust or suspicion. The former attitude is known as a hermeneutic of trust, or consent, while the latter attitude is called a hermeneutic of suspicion.³⁶

In general, theological interpreters operate with a hermeneutic of trust or consent. Although they do not deny the challenges and even the problems

36. A classic essay distinguishing between the two approaches and advocating for a hermeneutic of trust is Richard B. Hays, “Salvation by Trust? Reading the Bible Faithfully,” *Christian Century* 114 (February 26, 1997): 218–23, reprinted in Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel’s Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 190–201. For further discussion of this topic, see the introductory remarks to theological interpretation in chapter 8 below.

the Bible presents to us, they believe that Scripture has been a reliable guide to faith and life for thousands of years and can continue to be that kind of guide. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,” says the psalmist (Ps. 119:105).

Some people, however, have found themselves marginalized or hurt by the Bible, by certain parts of the Bible, or by certain biblical interpreters. This situation has led them to embrace a hermeneutic of suspicion—of distrust. In fact, ironically, it can be precisely this sense of distrust that leads some people to engage the Bible, especially within certain contexts or with certain ideological and advocacy purposes, as described above. For instance, liberationist approaches to the Bible question and critique what is perceived as the Bible’s mistreatment of the people such interpreters represent. Liberation is seen as a major theme of the Bible and as the goal of biblical interpretation. Texts are judged positively or negatively according to their perceived ability to liberate or to be used more generally for advocacy—or their inability to do so.

It should be noted, however, that even those who approach the text theologically may do so with some degree of suspicion, while those with particular contextual or ideological interests may be pursuing the study of biblical texts with a sense of hope and even trust that these texts may be interpreted in less damaging ways. For instance, devout believers are often concerned about the Bible’s narratives of violence and its passages about women and slaves. Furthermore, as discussed above, contextual and advocacy interpreters often do their work with theological or religious goals. Some (perhaps many) self-identified feminist and postcolonial interpreters, as well as many of those concerned about ecology and people with disabilities (for example), would say they operate with a sense of trust toward Scripture, but of suspicion toward many of Scripture’s interpreters over the centuries and today.

Students often ask, “Can a person operate with both trust and suspicion?” The answer seems to be yes—in a certain sense, and to a certain degree. Trust and suspicion can constitute something of a spectrum, and even the interpreters who are the most trusting of Scripture can be suspicious of other interpreters! (This is a good time to add that sometimes we should also be a bit suspicious of, or at least cautious about, *our own* interpretations of the Bible.) Perhaps a better term than *suspicion*, for those with a basic hermeneutic of trust, is to admit that we sometimes rightly approach the Bible with *concern*—concern about difficult texts, concern about how Scripture has been abused, concern about our own interpretive inadequacies and even about the effect of sin on our scriptural reading, and so on. What all engaged, perspectival, participatory interpreters share is a vested, personal interest in the process and results of exegesis. In my experience, however, most interpreters

lean strongly one way or the other: toward a hermeneutic of trust or toward one of suspicion.

The Approach of This Book

At this point, what can the average careful reader of the Bible do? The range of options might seem overwhelming. What we need is a model of exegesis that takes account of these various approaches but does not require a PhD in biblical studies (or in history, sociology, linguistics, or postcolonial theory) to execute. We need a model that recognizes the common features of biblical texts as ordinary devices of human communication while also acknowledging the importance of distinctly sacred features of biblical texts.

The approach advocated in this book is a somewhat eclectic and yet integrated one, drawing on various insights and methods mentioned above, but maintaining that there is no one right way. In fact, the approach of this book is compatible with all the analytical and engaged approaches in use today, and it can serve as a foundation for more detailed or sophisticated work that does stress one approach over the others.³⁷

Nonetheless, with respect to the two major analytical approaches—diachronic (historical-critical) and synchronic—the synchronic approach is predominant in this book. There are several reasons for this emphasis. The most important reason is that all exegetes, whether beginners or professionals, deal directly with the final form of the text. It is this text that readers read, preachers preach, and hearers hear. Another reason is that the diachronic (historical-critical) approach may require technical historical and linguistic skills that not all exegetes possess. Furthermore, the value (and even the possibility) of a purely historical-critical method has been questioned by many in recent years. Finally, even those whose primary goal in reading the text of Scripture is spiritual formation, the establishment of doctrine and practice, liberation, or advocacy must read in a way that is attentive to the form and substance of the words and images of the text. Indeed, engaged approaches generally use many of the synchronic methods of biblical exegesis.

Having said all that, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that, as much as I enjoy careful textual analysis as a task in itself, my own ultimate

37. For a comprehensive theoretical approach to interpretation that seeks to integrate the basic approaches discussed in this chapter, see Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), esp. 97–179. A similar holistic approach, with a more hands-on format, may be found in W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).