

**Biblical Interpretation:
Interpreting and Applying the Biblical Text
Dr. Rebecca G. S. Idestrom
Exegesis Paper Guidelines**

Always begin with prayer, asking for the Holy Spirit's guidance in the interpretive process. Then study the biblical text according to the following areas of exploration outlined below. When you write up the exegetical paper, you are presenting the *conclusions* arrived at during the interpretive process of studying the biblical text. The paper should be written in such a way that it *integrates* all that you have learned in the interpretive process.

Craig C. Broyles writes: "We should not proceed through these exegetical steps in a linear fashion (i.e., attempting to finish a step before moving to the next) but in a spiral fashion (i.e. revisiting and revising earlier steps once discoveries have surfaced)."¹

Take time to meditate on the passage as part of the process. In a prayerful manner, read the text over and over again (perhaps aloud to yourself) emphasizing different words and phrases in the process of reading.

1. Introduction

Begin the paper with an introduction stating which biblical passage will be analyzed. Then include the following components:

2. Textual Matters and Translation

The initial step in the study of a passage is to establish as much as possible the "original" text. This step involves using the method of textual criticism, to determine the text's wording. Discuss any textual problems present in the passage. If there are no textual problems apparent, simply say so and move on. However, if there are, what interpretive problems are raised by these and what solutions seem the most appropriate. Which reading will you adopt? Which translation forms the basis of your exegesis?

3. Compositional History

What, if anything, can be determined about the unity, date and authorship of the passage? Do we know anything about the original author or redactors/editors or about the original audience? Is there evidence of an oral stage before the text was written down? Was the passage composed from earlier written sources? Is there evidence of later revision, redaction or re-use? How does this information change how you read the text in terms of its final form?

¹ Craig C. Broyles, "Interpreting the Old Testament: Principles and Steps," in *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis* (ed. by Craig C. Broyles; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 20.

4. Genre and Structure

Identify the genre (literary form) and then outline the structure of the passage. Outlining the structure involves dividing the passage into sections and adding a heading or title for each section. Include the verses for each section.

5. Historical Context

Describe the historical, cultural, social context/background of the text. What is the *Sitz im Leben*, Life Setting? Are there clues in the passage itself? Give support for your answers from the biblical text and any secondary sources.

6. Literary Context and Canonical Placement

Describe the literary context of the passage. This will involve analyzing the passage within the chapter, within the section of the biblical book, within the book as a whole, within the biblical canon (the immediate context and the larger contexts). How does the passage relate to what precedes and follows it and within the document as a whole? What is the significance of the position or placement of the passage within the larger context? How does the larger context shed light on the passage?

7. Literary Analysis of the Text

In this section discuss the results of your in-depth close reading of the text. Go through the whole passage, verse by verse, making observations about each verse and explaining their significance. Discuss the flow and development of the narrative or the main argument(s). Are the key words or phrases repeated in the passage? Discuss the meaning certain words (you may need to do a word study, although this is optional). You may consider looking at any grammatical or syntactical features, like main and subordinate clauses, connective terms, modifiers (adjectives and adverbs), etc. Discuss any similes, metaphors, figures of speech.

8. Main Themes and Theological Message

Discuss the main themes in the passage as well as the theology that is emphasized in the text. In this section you are synthesizing the results of your study, looking at the message of the passage as a whole.

Some questions to consider: What are the main themes or sub-themes in the passage? What is the main overall message of the passage? Is there a main argument? What is its purpose? Are there certain theological traditions or themes alluded to in the passage (i.e. Exodus, Covenant, Creation theology, etc) which are found elsewhere in the biblical canon? Does the passage echo and clarify earlier passages? Is it echoed or developed in later passages (intertextuality)? Why was this passage included in the book? What theological truths are communicated? Summarize your conclusions.

9. Theological Implications and Application

In this section you are moving from what the text *meant* to what it *means* for us today. You are moving from the biblical context to the contemporary context. Here you want to look for application by recontextualizing.

First, outline some general principles arising from the biblical passage. What are some general principles or core values which flow out the biblical text which are not culture bound but timeless and therefore can be applied to our contemporary context? Here it is helpful to determine the points of contact and dissimilarity between the biblical and modern contexts. Try to identify what is culturally relative and what is theologically binding.

Then you want to recontextualize by considering the question of application in the modern context. What is the contemporary significance of the passage in your context? Here it is helpful to define your own context. What is the context in which you and your faith community live? How would you apply the message of the text in your context? Consider both personal application and corporate/communal application. What is God saying to you through the passage? What is God asking you to do or be? Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through the biblical text.

A final word: be careful of making the application too general or vague. Be specific. Give specific examples of application and a plan for how to implement them. Remember James 1:22–25.

10. Conclusion

Conclude with a final paragraph, summarizing what you have done in the paper.

A Practical Note:

Your paper needs to include a bibliography of the secondary sources used in your study. The paper should be about 12–15 pages in length (approximately 3000–3750 words). Use minimum of 7-10 sources.

Bibliography:

Broyles, Craig C. “Interpreting the Old Testament: Principles and Steps.” Pages 13–62 in *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis*. Edited by Craig C. Broyles. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001.

Stuart, Douglas. *Old Testament Exegesis: A Primer for Students and Pastors*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980.