Writing as Interpretation: Strategies for Exegesis Papers
Today, we shall

- Look at the big picture of exegesis
  - What it is
  - Why we do it

- Consider some perils in writing a good exegesis

- Learn practical strategies for crafting an exegesis
  - We will exegete 5 brief passages
Demystifying ‘Exegesis’

- Definition
  - An interpretation

- So, we can, and do, exegete stuff all the time
  - Other kinds of texts: What does the TV show Scandal say about contemporary American politics?
  - Social situations: What does it mean if someone doesn’t call you back after a first date?
  - My own responses: why does he always make me so mad?
Demystifying ‘Exegesis’

- We exegete anything we ‘read’
  - Consider: ‘I love you.’
  - The first part of John 3:16— ‘For God so loved the world…’

- So, basically, exegesis isn’t optional. We do it all the time. It’s not a new skill you’re learning, but new ways and skills to notice and transform something you do all the time.
What is biblical exegesis?

- An interpretation of a biblical passage.
- That’s it.

- For your class, it’s a formal presentation of evidence for a particular interpretation of a passage of scripture.
Biblical exegesis

- When you finish at Candler, unless you are planning to do academic work on the OT/NT, you are unlikely to write more exegesis papers.

- However, you will continue to exegete every passage you read, from now until forever.

- Thus, learn the skills for the class, but the skill for life.
What is good exegesis?

- **Etymology**

  - Exegesis
  - *ex*
  - hegeisthai
  - Out of
  - Lead, guide
Eisegesis

- Exegesis is *not* eisegesis

- Eisegesis: finding only my own suppositions, ideas, agenda, etc. in the text
Exegesis vs. Eisegesis

- What is it in the text?!?
  - Eisegesis puts things into the text in order to find them.
  - Exegesis reads, learns, and listens carefully.
Exegesis vs. Eisegesis

Exegesis, asking questions

Which raises new questions

Enter the text leads to

Meanings, which we then apply

Which raises new questions

Bring meaning into the text

Use the text to prove the meaning
Biblical exegesis—a summary

- Exegesis is a non-optional occurrence. It’s always happening. Every reading of the bible is an interpretation (even simply reading the words out loud).
Formalizing biblical exegesis is a way of considering our methods. What makes for a good reading?
Biblical exegesis—a summary

- The purpose of formalized biblical exegesis is to learn to be better readers of scripture.
What makes biblical exegesis complex?

- Its complexity comes from all the tools we need to consider to interpret the text.
  - Location of the pericope in text
  - Composition of the pieces of the text—form criticism
  - Rhetorical features
  - Final redacted form in the text
  - Textual variants from different text families
  - Resonance with other, similar texts within the bible
  - Resonance with other, similar texts outside the bible
  - Crucial terms in the text in their original language
  - The Sitz-im-Leben of the pericope
  - And so on…
A few things that require care

- Because biblical exegesis is so complex, every scholar in the field teaches beginners a little differently.

- In other words: do *exactly, step by step*, what your professor asks.
  - Because they do the grading.
  - Because it’s worth having some trust that their method will make you more skillful.
A few things that require care

- An exegesis is not a sermon. It is what happens, covertly or overtly, before a sermon.
- A sermon says something, based on an understanding, in order to accomplish another thing.
  - The exegesis is the understanding.
  - Sermons (and theology, ethics, pastoral care, and so on) rely on some understanding of scripture.
- Writing an exegesis means formally exploring the reasons and evidence for that understanding.
A few things that require care

- An example: let’s briefly exegete Exodus 20:13
  - You shall not murder.
  - What does this mean?
    - Who is the ‘you’?
    - What is ‘murder’?
    - What is the context?
  - “The text argues”
A few things that require care

- In the end, you are going to write a paper
- Keep an outline/worksheet separate as you prepare
- Include, if instructed, what the text means for contemporary society in the conclusion
- Follow all the best practices for writing a paper!
  - Thesis statement, organization, appropriate conclusion
  - Finish in time to make it to the Writing Center!
Strategies

- Now, we are going to practice exegeting through the use of some general strategies.

- Remember: use the lenses/frames/worksheets/methods from your professor. These general strategies reflect those methods.
Strategy 1: Read the text

- No, really. *Read* it.
  - Out loud. A few times. While paying attention.
  - Listen to it, and not what you *think* it’s about.
  - In original languages, or several translations.
  - Do this before you read commentaries. It’s good for your exegesis-skills.

- Think about each text like an intricately woven tapestry.
  - What does it look like?
  - How does it work?
Strategy 2: Locate what’s relevant from your reading

- Look for the likely relevant tools gleaned from your reading
  - Or go through each tool (Wilson’s and Strawn’s methods for NT), see what it uncovers, and highlight the relevant ones for your paper at the end
Strategies 1 and 2: Read and Relevant

John 1:1
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

- What are the main terms in this passage?
- What rhetorical structures are here?
- On what other passages does this passage riff?
- What is its *Sitz-im-Leben*, its original setting-in-life?
- What else will be important for this passage?
Strategies 1 and 2: Read and Relevant

Isaiah 53:5
But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

- What are the main terms in this passage?
- What is the context of this passage?
- Who is ‘he’?
- What is its *Sitz-im-Leben*, its original setting-in-life?
- What else will be important for this passage?
Strategies 1 and 2: Read and Relevant

Psalm 126
A Song of Ascents.

1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’
3 The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.
4 Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb.
5 May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.
6 Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

- What is the structure of the passage?
- What is its context?
- What are the main terms in this passage?
- What is its Sitz-im-Leben, its original setting-in-life?
- What else will be important for this passage?
Strategy 3: Experts and Evidence

Experts

- Consult appropriate commentaries
- See what others have seen in the text
- See how it gives you new data
- See how it reframes your question so that you can read the text. Again. And ask new questions.
Strategy 4: Write a Thesis Statement

- The order of discovery
  - This is cool, and this is cool, and this is cool. Huh. I wonder if I added all that up …
  - Ah-ha! This is very cool!

- The order of writing
  - The pericope is very cool, as we can see in cool examples one, two, and three.

- Remember which is which for your paper.
Exegete well!

- Come to the Candler Writing Center
  - RARB 311
  - Friendly one-on-one conversation with you on your work

- Upcoming Workshops
  - March 3: From the Classroom to the Congregation: Writing for Ecclesial Contexts
  - April 9: Religious and Not Spiritual?: Thinking Faith and Believing Academics Together in Your Writing