

Textual (or Exegetical) Analysis

What is a Textual Analysis?

A textual or exegetical analysis or 'exegesis' is, in simplest terms, an explanation (literally: 'draws out' the meaning) of a biblical passage. In doing an exegesis it should be assumed that the person to whom you are explaining the passage is an intelligent and interested enquirer who knows the basics of theology and biblical studies, but not much more.

The purpose of setting passages for comment is to encourage students to study the primary sources (i.e. a Hebrew Bible or New Testament text in this case), and not just to rely on secondary literature. Exegetical assignments are not intended to read like an excerpt from a commentary in note form or as a summary of different scholarly theories about the passage in question.

How to Begin to Write a Textual Analysis

- You will need to begin by looking up the passage in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). You may also choose to compare this particular translation of the passage with other versions, such as RSV, NIV, REB, NJB, AV. For comparative purposes you will find the Bible Gateway particularly helpful (<https://www.biblegateway.com>) because the right hand menu includes a wide range of translations/versions.
- Underline and, as far as possible, make preliminary notes on key words, phrases and themes in the passage (particularly if they are, in your estimation, typical of the biblical text in question).
- Only then turn to the commentaries to see what they have to say about the key words and themes that you have already identified. This process will probably enable you to identify additional words/themes and other issues of direct relevance to a discussion of the passage in question.
- You may also want to draw on the unit outlines and additional reading that you have consulted this semester.

- Write up your exegetical notes in ‘essay form’ in so far as your exegesis has a beginning, central section, and conclusion.
- You are not expected to include footnotes at every stage of your discussion, but distinctive ideas (attributable to one commentator in particular) should be acknowledged with the aid of footnotes.
- At the end of the assignment you will need to add a bibliography; this will include the Bible translation(s) that you have used, as well as the commentaries, other books, and Dictionary/Handbook entries.
- The best assignments are concisely expressed, sharply focused and well informed.

What to Include in a Textual Analysis

The following aspects will need to be covered in most exegetical assignments, but especially in an exegesis on a passage drawn from the Hebrew Bible or New Testament:

Context: You should begin with an introductory paragraph that sets the passage in its literary and theological context. Where does the passage occur in the text? How does it fit into the text or narrative? Does it have any biblical (HB or NT) counterparts? You will not need to include too much detail, although it does depend where the verse(s) are drawn from.

Brief Outline of Content: The introductory paragraph can conclude with a brief (one- or two-sentence) summary of the content of the passage.

From this point onwards, the exegesis will require a careful verse-by-verse analysis (although some verses may require less examination than others).

History and Theology: As you work your way through the passage you will need to identify clearly, and discuss briefly, the key historical questions raised by the passage as well as its central theological themes and ideas (‘hooks’), giving an explanation of

any particularly important or difficult words or phrases (try not to write too extensively on issues of peripheral interest). As well as offering a general comment on these words/themes, it may be necessary to consider their relation to other references to the same historical question and/or theological theme elsewhere in the text. This process will help you identify the contribution of the passage under consideration to the outworking of the author's narrative and theological design.

Special attention therefore needs to be given to the distinctive theology that is expressed in the text in question. Comments on use of special sources and links with other traditions (Jewish or early Christian) are certainly relevant and necessary, but historical, literary and theological issues will often dominate the analysis of the passage under consideration.

Conclusion: A concluding section is required which draws your discussion's various threads together, giving particular attention to the passage's overall literary, theological, and historical significance.

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