

CHAPTER ONE

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, or parishioners 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 among responsible readers of the Bible. The purpose of this small 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, it 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, etc.—most of which consist of no more than

several closely connected paragraphs. The technical term for such careful analysis of a biblical text is *exegesis*, from the Greek verb *exēgeisthai*, meaning “to lead out” (*ex*, “out” + *hēgeisthai*, “to lead”). In this chapter we consider the task of exegesis and survey the method proposed in this book.

Exegesis as Investigation, Conversation, and Art

Exegesis may be defined as the careful historical, literary, and theological analysis 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 is “close reading,” a term borrowed from the study of literature. “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. Those who engage in the process of exegesis are called exegetes.²

Many people over the years have understood the goal of exegesis to be the discovery of the biblical writer’s purpose in writing, or what is called the “authorial intention.” While a laudable goal, this is often difficult to achieve. Many interpreters today reject authorial intention as the goal of exegesis. It can be hard enough to grasp our own intentions in writing something, let alone those of another person from another time and culture.³ 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.

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

²However, exegetes should resist the temptation to create a new verb “to exegete,” as in “to exegete a text.”

³Though always difficult, the pursuit of authorial intention may be wiser, easier, and more appropriate in certain situations. For instance, the task may be a bit easier in reading, say, part of a letter known to be from Paul than in considering a passage (say in 2 Kings) whose author is unknown.

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. Exegetes must learn to love to ask 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 aims?” Furthermore, exegesis means asking questions about the religious, or theological, dimensions of the text, such as “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 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.

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 “profession.” Students are normally required to write exegesis papers on their own. Pastors or 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.

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 steps to follow, 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.

Exegesis, then, is investigation, conversation, and art. As conversation and art, 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 result was called an *explication de texte*. As noted above, this way of careful reading of 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 (historical context) in which it was produced and in which it is situated (literary context).

Furthermore, we can understand a text only if we pay careful attention to both the whole and the parts (details), the proverbial forest as well as the trees. Before considering in detail 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.

There are perhaps three basic approaches to exegesis today. We will call them *synchronic*, *diachronic*, and *existential*.

The Synchronic Approach

One approach to exegesis is called *synchronic* (meaning “with[in] time,” i.e., “same time”; cf. “synchronize”). It may be compared to a cross section of a plant’s stem depicted in a biology textbook. This approach looks only at 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 (such as the hypothetical sources called J, E, D, and P in the Pentateuch or Q in the gospels⁴). Rather, 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 approach are narrative-critical, social-scientific, and socio-rhetorical. (Rhetoric is the art of effective communication.) 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.”⁵

⁴On these matters, consult any introductory OT or NT text, or see “The Character and Composition of the Books of the Old Testament” by David Leiter and “The Character and Composition of the Books of the New Testament” by Michael J. Gorman, in Michael J. Gorman, ed., *Scripture: An Ecumenical Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005), 45–70, 71–90.

⁵Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1996), 1.

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:⁶

- **literary criticism**—the quest to understand the text as literature by employing either traditional or more recent models of literary criticism that are employed in the study of literature generally; corollaries of literary criticism are **genre and form analysis**, the quests to classify a text as to its type
- **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
- **rhetorical criticism**—the quest to understand the devices, strategies, and structures employed in the text to persuade and/or otherwise affect the reader, as well as the overall goals or effects of those rhetorical elements
- **lexical, grammatical, and syntactical analysis**—the quest to understand words, idioms, grammatical forms, and the relationships among these items 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 according to modern principles and theories of linguistics
- **social-scientific criticism**—the quest for 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**⁷

If these terms and the methods to which they refer seem at first foreign or complex, readers should bear in mind that they have probably already been introduced to them in the study of litera-

⁶For a more inclusive overview of the various criticisms and the questions they seek to answer, see the table in Appendix A.

⁷The questions asked and/or 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 below 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, whether on describing and analyzing the social setting contemporary with the biblical text (social-scientific criticism) or on reconstructing the historical developments that led to the production of the biblical text (historical criticism).

ture. The synchronic approach to the text 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 of it:

- **genre and implied situation**—the type of literature the text is, and the 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 text⁸

As we will see, these are all very similar to the elements of exegesis presented in this book. Many advocates of a primarily synchronic approach to texts also incorporate some of the methods of diachronic exegesis discussed below.

A synchronic approach to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) 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?
- 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?
- What is the function of the Sermon in the gospel’s portrayal of Jesus and of discipleship?
- How would a first-century reader/hearer understand and be affected by this Sermon?

The Diachronic Approach (The Historical-Critical Method)

The second approach to exegesis is the *diachronic* (meaning “across time”) approach, and it focuses on the origin and development of a text, employing methods designed to uncover these aspects of it. It takes the “long view” of a text and may be compared to a longitudinal perspective on a plant stem in a biology text. As a constellation of methods, this approach is often referred to as the *historical-critical method*, and it was the approach of choice by many, if not most, biblical scholars of the twentieth century.

⁸Adapted from Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 207–11. Similarly, the basic standard parts of an *explication de texte* in French literature are situation, form, subject, analysis, and conclusion.

This book will give some, but limited, attention to the so-called historical-critical methods of exegesis. They include:⁹

- **textual criticism**—the quest for the original wording of the text (and the ways later scribes 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 for the original type of oral or written tradition reflected in the text, and for the sort of situation in the life of Israel or the early church out of which such a tradition might have developed¹⁰
- **tradition criticism**—the quest for understanding the growth of a tradition over time from its original form to its incorporation in the final text
- **source criticism**—the quest for the written sources used in the text
- **redaction criticism**—the quest for perceiving the ways in which the final author of the text purposefully adopted and adapted sources
- **historical criticism**—the quest for the events that surrounded the production of the text, including the purported events narrated by the text itself¹¹

A diachronic approach to the Sermon on the Mount 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 career 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?

⁹For an overview of the various criticisms and the questions they seek to answer, see the table in Appendix A.

¹⁰The technical term for this phenomenon (the “situation”), though it is now less widely used, is the German phrase *Sitz im Leben* (“setting in life”).

¹¹I 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 historical events related to the genesis, development, production, and background of the text under investigation. In this sense, as indicated in an earlier note, “historical criticism” and “social-scientific criticism” are closely related but differ in emphasis.

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 has proposed using the term "historical biblical criticism."¹²

Practitioners of the diachronic approach are also interested in some of the questions raised by advocates of a more synchronic approach to the text. 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 focus of investigation in both the diachronic and the synchronic approaches to the text is twofold: the world *of* or *within* the text and the world *behind* the text. That is, exegetes who investigate the text with these methods are literary and historical critics—analysts of the historical and literary features of the text. 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 come to life and in the kind of literature texts are. But these are not the only possible focal points of investigation of a text. Some readers want to focus on the world *in front of* the text, the world that the text "creates."

The Existential Approach

A third approach, which has no commonly used name, may perhaps be labeled *existential*. Since it is an increasingly common but also occasionally criticized approach to exegesis,¹³ we will consider

¹²Karl 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), 19–46, esp. 22–25.

¹³Choosing an appropriate label for this approach is extraordinarily difficult, and none is completely satisfactory. Other options, all of which have problems of their own, include *hermeneutical*, *instrumental*, *transformative*, *self-involving*, *pragmatic*, and *interactive*. (As we will see, the main "existential" approach is *theological*, and though it is tempting to use that label here, theological interpretation is actually part of a wider approach to reading texts.) Two points of clarification about the term used, and the concept it represents, are in order. (1) By using the term *existential*, I do not mean to make any connection to existentialism as a

it now in more detail than the others noted above, which are thoroughly discussed in many handbooks¹⁴ and which will be considered as part of the exegetical procedure outlined in subsequent chapters.

Proponents of the existential approach to reading the Bible are primarily interested not in the text per se—whether understood in terms of its formation (diachronically) or its final form (synchronically)—but in the text as something to be engaged. Existential methods are therefore “instrumental” methods: they allow the text to be read as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. 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 “spiritual” truth beyond the “literal” truth, 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*.

More generally, we may describe this approach to exegesis as *self-involving*:¹⁵ 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 lives. The text is taken seriously

philosophy or to identify this approach exclusively with the specific existentialist interpretation of the Bible associated with the name of Rudolf Bultmann. I especially differentiate this approach to exegesis from the very individualistic emphasis found in Bultmann. (2) Some practitioners of exegesis more narrowly understood would argue that existential exegesis is not exegesis at all but *interpretation*, or *hermeneutics* (the technical term for interpretation). This argument often incorrectly assumes that diachronic (and perhaps also synchronic) approaches are objective or scientific while existential readings are biased. In fact, however, all reading is biased, and the methods chosen affect both what is observed and which conclusions are drawn. Moreover, this third 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 theologians and biblical scholars, while others advocate it vigorously.

¹⁴See chapter 11, section 1, pp. 182–89, “Resources for Understanding the Task.”

¹⁵For a use of this concept that rescues it from the privatistic inclinations of existentialism, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 272–307, 564–66, 615–18.

with respect to human existence now, both individual existence and life in community (the private self and the corporate self). The reader wants to engage not merely the world behind the text or the world of the text but the world *before* the text. 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.

By using methods that allow their own participation in the exegesis, existential readers enlarge the contexts within which the biblical text is read.¹⁶

- **theological exegesis, missional interpretation, and spiritual (or sacred) reading (*lectio divina*)**—exegesis is done in the context of a specific religious tradition and for religious purposes.
- **canonical criticism**—exegesis is done in the context of the Bible as a whole.
- **embodiment or actualization**—exegesis is done in the context of attempting to appropriate and embody the text in the world.
- **ideological criticism (including postcolonial criticism), advocacy criticism, and liberationist exegesis**—exegesis is done in the context of the struggle *against* unequal power relations and injustice and *for* justice or liberation.

These contexts significantly affect the methods, goals, and results of exegesis.

The existential approach to reading texts also 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. Existential, 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 interests in “studying” the Bible.

The existential approach to the text might ask the following kinds of questions of the Sermon on the Mount:

- To what kind of contemporary faith and practice does the Sermon call contemporary readers?
- How might the text about “turning the other cheek” be a potential source of difficulty or even oppression for the politically or socially downtrodden?

¹⁶For an overview of some existential methods, see the table in Appendix A.

- 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?
- What spiritual practices are necessary for individuals and churches to live the message of the Sermon in the contemporary world?

Readers who approach the text in this way use diverse methods and have a wide variety of goals or agendas. Both diachronic and synchronic methods can be appropriated, and others may be introduced as well. Practitioners of existential 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 God.¹⁷

Excursus: Some Types of Existential Exegesis

Existential approaches to the biblical text can be divided into two basic types, those that operate with a fundamental trust in or consent to the text, and those that operate with a basic suspicion of the text. Theological exegesis, *lectio divina*, missional interpretation, canonical criticism, and embodiment are types of existential approaches listed above that are approaches marked fundamentally by trust/consent. Ideological criticism, advocacy criticism, and liberationist exegesis are approaches marked by suspicion.

Trust/Consent

The most ancient existential approach is that of *theological exegesis* or *theological interpretation*, which is currently undergoing a great revival.¹⁸ 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 an encounter with 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 under-

¹⁷For further discussion, see Stephen Fowl, "Theological and Ideological Strategies of Biblical Interpretation," in *Scripture* (ed. Gorman), 163–76.

¹⁸A fuller discussion of theological interpretation may be found in chapter 8.

stood as more than a historical artifact or literary work; it is viewed as sacred text, as Scripture.

Theological exegetes may also take into account the perceived purposes of God—the divine mission (*missio Dei*)—in salvation history, the incarnation, or the paschal mystery (the death and resurrection of Jesus) as contexts for interpretation. Practitioners of *missional interpretation* 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 anachronistic (since the entire Bible did not exist as one book when a particular biblical document was composed). 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/or confession.

Further, advocates of theological exegesis sometimes appeal to *premodern* or *precritical* ways of Jewish and Christian reading of the Bible that allow for a variety of meanings in the text. The additional ways, which may include allegorical reading, yield meanings that are sometimes referred to as spiritual or figurative rather than literal meanings.¹⁹ The current revival of interest in the “fourfold sense of Scripture” is especially important. This medieval way of reading the Bible insisted that scriptural texts had (normally three) meanings in addition to the “literal” or “plain” sense. Although the methods currently used differ from their medieval counterparts, the questions asked by the methods are the same: What are we to believe (faith), to expect (hope), and to do (love)?²⁰

¹⁹It 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 or precritical (pre-Enlightenment) exegesis. Such ancient methods (including, for example, allegorical reading of the text) had their appropriate pride of place in their day, and they still have much to teach us. It is unlikely, however, that we can or should simply return to premodern ways of reading and ignore the contributions of modern scholarship. Ironically, some advocates of pre-critical approaches employ very modern philosophical understandings of language and meaning to justify their rejection of modern critical methods.

²⁰These correspond to the medieval interpretations usually labeled allegorical (concerning doctrine), anagogical (concerning the future hope), and tropological (concerning behavior). For an introductory

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 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"²¹ 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. (We will have more to say about all of this in chapter 8.)

Suspicion

A quite different, and much more recent, existential approach is known as *ideological criticism*. Practitioners of ideological criticism see the text as a witness to relations of power that can be harmful, especially to certain groups of marginalized people. Often using recently developed social-scientific methods, they seek to uncover and eventually to disarm the relations of oppressive power that the text both signifies and sanctions. The text is read and then "un-read" as a means of naming and being freed from oppression.

Postcolonial criticism, a type of ideological criticism, is the analysis of texts by those who have been affected by, or sensitized to the effects of, colonization. It focuses especially on the presence of both affirmations and criticisms of empire and colonization in the Bible, and on ways in which the Bible has been read (or is currently read) to underwrite various forms of empire and colonization. Postcolonial criticism includes the critique of powerful colonizers' interpretation of biblical texts.

Somewhere between theological and ideological exegesis, but usually embodying a spirit of suspicion, lie *advocacy criticism* and its most common manifestation, *liberationist exegesis*. This type of exegesis is often theological in that it may bring an ethical or theological goal and criterion to the process of reading: the thing advocated or the libera-

discussion, see Carole C. Burnett, "The Interpretation of the Bible before the Modern Period," in *Scripture* (ed. Gorman), 133–45.

²¹See, for example, M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), 114.

tion sought is often, though not always, understood as God's purpose in self-revelation. Texts are judged by their perceived ability to liberate (or to be used more generally for advocacy) or not. Like ideological criticism, liberationist exegesis often draws on social-scientific methods and models and is concerned to name and address oppression. Similarly, some forms of postcolonial criticism engage in advocacy and do so for explicitly theological reasons.

The Approach of This Book

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

The approach advocated in this book is somewhat of an eclectic and yet integrated one, drawing on the insights and methods of all of the three basic approaches mentioned above, but maintaining that there is no one "right" way. In fact, the approach of this book is compatible with all three clusters of methods in use today and can serve as a foundation for more detailed or sophisticated work that does stress one approach over the others.²²

Nonetheless, of the three approaches, the first, or synchronic one, is predominant in this book, especially vis-à-vis the diachronic, or historical-critical, approach. 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 other two approaches may require technical historical and linguistic skills or sophisticated theological perspectives that not all readers possess. Furthermore,

²²For a comprehensive theoretical approach to interpretation that seeks to integrate all three of the basic approaches discussed here, see Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament As Sacred Scripture* (2d ed.; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 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* (3d ed.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2008).

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, or human liberation must read in a way that is attentive to the form and substance of the words and images of the text. Indeed, existentialist 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 aim in reading Scripture is theological—and I suspect that it is as well for many readers of this book. In my experience, an eclectic but largely synchronic approach best serves this existential *telos*.

The guidelines presented in this book rest on several assumptions. Chief among these is the assumption that the Bible must be read in its various contexts—those things that accompany, or go “with” (Latin *con*), the text itself. This assumption, and the method of interpretation it produces, attempts to take many factors into account:

- that the Bible is the work of many people, written over a period of more than one thousand years in many different specific historical situations (the historical, social, and cultural contexts)
- that every biblical passage is located within a larger work and that it contributes to the aims of that work (the literary and rhetorical contexts)
- that the Bible, like other sacred texts, gives expression to humanity’s thirst for meaning and value in life (the human context)
- that for Christians and Jews the Bible is a unique and authoritative revelation of and/or witness to God’s activity in history (the biblical/canonical and religious contexts)
- that all readers of the Bible, no matter how novice or sophisticated, interpret the Bible from within their own social situations and world-views, and these social and intellectual locations affect the ways in which they understand the Bible (the contemporary context)

Each of these contexts has significant impact on the interpretation of biblical texts, and the careful reader must be aware of all of them.

A corollary to the last assumption ought also to be noted here: because of each reader’s own unique experiences and “location,” he or she will have insight into the Bible that no one else will have. Each reader can learn to bring together literary and historical

perspectives as well as personal experience to understand a written text in a way that is unique to that individual and that contributes to the ongoing conversation about the text. Although the isolated individual is not the ideal interpreter of Scripture, there can be no conversation without unique individuals contributing to the discussion.

At the same time, however, there are necessary safeguards to ensure that one's *exegesis* of the Bible is not really *eisegesis*—reading *into* the text (the Greek *eis* meaning “into”).²³ A sound exegetical method is one such safeguard. Other safeguards include both the basic tools of biblical knowledge and research (Bible dictionaries, maps, concordances, etc.) and the fruits of research and reflection produced by biblical scholars and other interpreters of the Bible (in commentaries, journal articles, etc.). These publications can answer basic questions (who? what? when? where?) during the initial exegetical process. For example, they will provide answers to such basic inquiries as “Who was Josiah?” or “What is a denarius?” More important, scholarly resources also verify, sharpen, and correct your work after you have done your own exegesis. Thus one important aspect of the exegetical process is the confirmation and correction of your own discoveries and insights, the refinement and expansion of your ideas through conversation and research.

An Overview of the Method

Thus far we have examined rationale and theory. The remainder of this book is largely devoted to the nuts and bolts of exegesis—the careful reading of and writing about the Bible. A close, careful reading or exegesis of a biblical passage requires a process. The process proposed in this book has seven basic elements. These are briefly outlined here and will be developed in more detail in subsequent chapters.

For purposes of *reading* a biblical text, the elements in this process cannot and should not always be followed slavishly; these steps are, rather, the necessary *elements* of a careful reading, or exegesis. (Thus the title of this book is *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*.) The actual process of reading and interpretation is more like a circle than an outline, as you move back and forth from part to whole,

²³Some would argue that *all* exegesis is really eisegesis. This view may be understandable but is unnecessarily cynical.

text to context, original meaning to contemporary relevance, and so on. This process is sometimes referred to as a “hermeneutical circle,” hermeneutics being the art of interpretation. Interpretation is indeed more like a circular than a linear process; it has been aptly described as a process of “going forward by circling around.”²⁴ The image of a circle is not, therefore, meant to suggest lack of progress, as in a vicious or endless circle from which there is no escape. (Some interpreters have suggested that a better image is that of a spiral, the action of which is tighter and tighter.)²⁵ Another helpful analogy is that of weaving: exegesis is the weaving together of unique but interrelated strands or elements of a careful reading of the text. Nevertheless, it will be extremely beneficial to think carefully through each of the discrete elements of, or steps in, the method.

For purposes of *writing* about a biblical text (e.g., an exegetical paper), the following method can be successfully used as it stands to yield high-quality written interpretations. It can also be altered according to the needs and wishes of individual students and instructors.

The seven elements of the method are:

- **survey**—preparation and overview, or introduction
- **contextual analysis**—consideration of the historical and literary contexts of the text
- **formal analysis**—of the form, structure, and movement of the text
- **detailed analysis**—of the various parts of the text
- **synthesis**—of the text as a whole
- **reflection**—on the text today
- **expansion and refinement**—of the initial exegesis²⁶

²⁴Frederick C. Tiffany and Sharon H. Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 68–69.

²⁵See Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (rev. ed.; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006). Osborne believes that careful study of genre, text, etc. will get us closer and closer to the biblical author’s intended meaning and its significance for us, and thus the spiral becomes “tighter and tighter.”

²⁶Though the order of presentation may be different, the main elements of exegesis are very similar to the elements of close reading done by literary critics, as listed above: *genre and implied situation*, or what we have called analysis of *form* and consideration of the *historical and literary contexts*; *intellectual core*, or what we have called *synthesis*; *structure and unity*, or what we have called *structure and movement*; *literary or poetic texture*, or what we have called *detailed analysis*; and *artistry*, or something

It is important to note that some exegetes would consider the element of reflection to be something supplemental to exegesis itself. They might suggest that any notion of personal or theological reflection on a text is unscientific at best and an invitation to eisegesis at worst. However, as Rudolf Bultmann, the great German biblical scholar of the first half of the twentieth century, said, there is no exegesis without presuppositions.²⁷ We all come to the text with interests in it, maybe even an agenda. Biblical texts compel us to ask not only “What?” but “So what?” Historical and literary critics we may be, or wish to become, but we are also human beings seeking an encounter with truths and realities to which sacred texts point.

Refusing to consider responsible reflection on and with the text as an aspect of exegesis is shortsighted and unnecessary. Most exegetes have their eyes on “two horizons”—the horizon, or world, of the biblical text itself, and the horizon, or world, of their own personal and corporate experience. This is both normal and appropriate, though there are ways of engaging these two horizons that are more responsible than others. Exegetes who have no interest in the contemporary significance of biblical texts are, of course, free to refrain from reflection on them. Most people, however, even if they do not consider themselves religious, find it difficult to avoid reflecting on great literature, religious or otherwise. We do not have to be committed spiritual readers or liberation theologians to have this legitimate interest, but neither do we have to hide our religious commitments when we approach the text even in an academic setting. (Although it is of course easier and generally considered more appropriate to be explicit about such commitments in a religiously affiliated institution, there is no reason, especially in a postmodern context, that those in secular institutions must refrain from expressing their own interests and commitments, as long as they do so with intellectual humility and with respect for the views of others.)

like our *reflection*. For a process similar to the one proposed in this book, though presented in a somewhat less technical way and in a different sequence, see Tiffany and Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation*.

²⁷Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?” in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (trans. Schubert Ogden; New York: Meridian, 1960), 342–51. It has been pointed out by Anthony Thiselton (*New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 45) that by “presupposition” Bultmann was referring to a “pre-understanding” as a relation in life to the subject matter of the texts, not merely to beliefs, and especially not to fixed beliefs or doctrines that allow for no alteration.