An Introduction to Critical Methods

Exegesis: Explanation, exposition (of a sentence, word, etc.); *esp.* the interpretation of Scripture or a Scriptural passage, from the Greek *ex-* (out) + *hēge-esthai* (to guide, to lead). In the modern academic context, "exegesis" is practiced through any number of critical methods, each oriented to particular questions you might like to pose to a text. Asterisks indicate methods we will practice in class.

Historical-Critical Methods

Your Question	Method	Definition	Basic Steps
What did the earliest form of the text actually say?	Textual Criticism	The reconstruction of the earliest form of the text based on all available manuscript witnesses. Because it requires judgments about the earliest forms of the texts, the analysis must be done in the original languages.	1. Begin by collecting at least four versions of the text and a reliable commentary on it. 2. List the translation differences between your versions of the text. 3. Shortlist the most significant ones. 4. Read the commentary for insight on the history of the text. 5. Identify errors in the transmission history of the text. 6. Read about the textual history of the book; place what you've discovered within this broader context.
What bits of tradition did the author utilize, and where did they come from?	Form Criticism	The study of the structure, content and original function of literary or oral units embedded in the scriptural text and the identification of the original *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) of the unit (before its incorporation into a literary text).	1. Discover the form. Isolate the beginning and end of a logical sense unit. 2. Describe the form. Break the text down into sense lines, then name these lines in terms of their intent (e.g., accusation, verdict, prediction). Then name the entire form. 3. Determine the content and intent of the entire form (e.g., content = teaching, intent = didactic; content = plea, intent = petition). 4. Suggest a social location for such a form (e.g., temple liturgy, preaching, law court, marketplace, home).
What major literary traditions did the author work with? What were their themes and historical circumstances?	Source Criticism	The study of the different major literary components of a text and the historical situations they reflect. It is assumed that some biblical texts are composite works, and that some of their components originated in earlier historical periods and exhibit different themes.	1. Search for textual anomalies (irregularities such as thematic inconsistency, repetition, digression, change in vocabulary or style). 2. Isolate the anomaly from the surrounding text. 3. Discern and list the themes important to the anomalous passage and to the surrounding text.
What were Matthew's (or Luke's) unique theological interests? Who was his audience? What historical circumstances shaped his perspective?	Redaction Criticism ✛	The study of the theological perspective of a biblical text evident in its collection, arrangement, editing and modification of sources. A redactor's editorial activity is easiest to discern when we have several parallel versions of the same story, as we do in the four gospels.	1. Compare your text against the other gospel accounts of the same event (using a synopsis). Isolate shared and unique material. 2. Account for the similarities and differences you have found, with the help of a commentary. Offer an account of your author's theological or ecclesiological perspective, given the evidence.

Literary-Critical Methods

How does the placement of this episode affect the meaning of the story? What story-telling features are apparent in this episode, and how do they reveal the meaning of the story? How are the characters depicted, and to what end?	**Narrative Criticism** ✝✝	The study of the literary features and dynamics of a narrative text. Typical focal points for study include the text's *aspect* (fiction or non-fiction, prose or poetry), *genre* (history, legend, myth, etc.), *structure* (including plot, theme, irony, foreshadowing, etc.), *characterization*, *setting*, and *narrative perspective*.	1. Identify the literary aspect and genre of the text. 2. Analyze the literary structure of the piece. Where does the plot begin, end, climax? What are the key episodes without which the story would make no sense? Does the placement of the episode indicate anything about its meaning? What literary techniques are used to stress themes (e.g., foreshadowing, repetition, irony), and what themes are visible through these techniques? 3. Analyze the characterization of individuals in the text. Who are the protagonists? Antagonists? What are their motives? Do they change? Who is allowed to speak? 4. Determine whether the setting of a pericope adds anything to the themes you've identified in the plot. 5. Study the narrator's perspective. Is the narrator omniscient? What view does the narrator favor of the plot, characters, themes?
What is the argument's point? What proofs and techniques does it employ to persuade the audience? What problem is the author addressing?	**Rhetorical Criticism** ✝✝	The study of how a text persuades an audience of its perspective. Classical rhetoric offers certain parameters for forms and techniques of persuasion that you would study and then identify in your focal text.	1. Identify the type of rhetoric the piece represents (epideictic, deliberative, judicial). 2. Determine the problem to which the author is responding. 3. Outline the speaker's arguments. Identify the main points and the supporting arguments or proofs (*logos*), as well as the images, emotional "plays" the author uses to lend color and persuasive power to the piece (*pathos*). Determine whether the author makes any appeals to his own character (*ethos*). 4. Analyze the argument. Who are the authorities behind it? How is the argument ordered? What rhetorical techniques are used? 5. Reassess the problem to which the author is responding. How bad is it? What's at stake for the author?

Social-Scientific Methods

What are the social circumstances that inform this text? What are the operative assumptions about the family, religion, economics, politics, cultural values? Do contemporary social and anthropological models help us to read these texts?	**Social-Scientific Criticism**	The study of the original social and cultural setting of a text using clues in the text's content and rhetoric and other ancient evidence (literary, archaeological, epigraphic).	1. Choose an institution in which you are interested (family/kinship, economics, politics, religion) or a cultural value (honor/shame, group identity vs. individual identity, social status and the limited good, purity and pollution). 2. Deductive approach: Select a model for the dynamics of that institution or value (how it worked in antiquity). For example, you could choose the cultural values associated with purity and pollution, select anthropologist Mary Douglas' model for how that value operates, and apply it to a biblical pericope.

Contextual Methods

Where are the women in the text? How are women's and men's social roles constructed, and to whose advantage? How does the representation of women intersect with issues of socio-economic class and ethnicity?	**Feminist Criticism**	The study of biblical texts to recover the experience of women in antiquity and to critique norms and interpretations whereby that experience was and is marginalized. This is not a stand-alone method with clear steps; feminists generally utilize one of the other methods and pose questions such as those to the right.	1. Is there a woman or a woman's point of view in this text? 2. How are women portrayed in this text? Do they speak? Are we given access to their point of view? 3. Who has the power in this text? How is power distributed? How do women get what they want (if they do)? And what do women want? 4. How does the text represent uniquely female experiences, such as childbearing or menstruation, or traditionally female experiences, such as child rearing? 5. How have women's lives and voices been suppressed by this text? Are women made to speak and act against their own interests? 6. What hidden gender assumptions lie behind this text (e.g., that women lead men astray, that women cannot be trusted)? 7. Is the import of the passage to reinforce or to alter contemporary gender roles? Does the text betray any anxiety about changing gender roles? 8. Whose interests are being served?
How did ancient imperial propaganda shape the message of the biblical text? How is the Bible read in parts of the world where it was introduced by a foreign empire? How is the Bible deployed by modern empires?	**Postcolonial Criticism**	The study of the deployment of biblical texts in imperial discourse and the interpretation of those texts in the postcolonial aftermath. While this form of criticism is oriented toward contemporary interpretation, some theoretical insights can be applied to the ancient imperial situations within which the biblical texts were generated.	The steps you would take will depend on whether your topic is historical or contemporary. 1. If you choose an historical topic, select a biblical text and analyze its language and themes (its rhetoric) in light of Roman imperial propaganda. Study whether the text resists and/or accommodates itself to that imperial rhetoric, and to what end. It's helpful to use concepts from postcolonial theory to explore the purpose of the rhetoric; the professor can suggest relevant concepts once you narrow down a topic. 2. If you choose a contemporary topic, select a country or region of the postcolonial world and compare/contrast the style of biblical interpretation there to the styles of interpretation common in the West. It's helpful (as always) to select a particular biblical passage as a common focus (such as the exodus/conquest tradition [Exodus/Joshua] or the story of the bleeding woman [Mark 5:25-34]).

The Fortress Press series, "Guides to Biblical Scholarship," provides handy paperback introductions to most forms of exegesis. For your exegetical paper, you'll be expected to use one book about your method, as well as other sources on your passage. The steps listed above are intended only as a basic introduction to help you choose your method.