Planning your Exegetical Paper

The first two tasks in an exegetical project are to determine the biblical text on which you will focus and to decide what question you want to answer about that passage. Every other decision, from the method you choose to the sources you select, will derive from these first two choices.

The biblical text you choose may be any text from any NT book. It should be the length of a gospel pericope or an epistolary argument, more than five verses but rarely as long as a chapter.

The question that the passage raises for you is yours to determine. No external guide can dictate what interests you. Your choice of exegetical method will be determined by the question you want to answer, because an exegetical method is simply a process for answering certain questions. For example:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>If your interest is</th>
<th>This is the exegetical method you might use</th>
<th>How the method works</th>
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<tr>
<td>Matthew or Luke’s theological interests</td>
<td>Redaction Criticism</td>
<td>You choose either Matthew or Luke, observe how they changed their source Mark and/or Q, and then demonstrate the theological interests that these changes indicate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Any gospel’s interests</td>
<td>Narrative Criticism</td>
<td>You observe the literary structure and vocabulary of your passage in light of the overall structure and themes of the given gospel</td>
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<td>The social background of a given passage (economic, political, kinship/societal networks, cultural values)</td>
<td>Social-Scientific Criticism</td>
<td>You first decide what aspect of the social/cultural system you want to analyze, and then select social-scientific studies of your book/passage to glean from their research about social conditions in the New Testament world</td>
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<tr>
<td>The message of an argument or part of an argument in an epistle</td>
<td>Rhetorical Criticism</td>
<td>You learn about the typical structures and tropes of rhetoric and use these to analyze the structure and persuasive techniques of the author</td>
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<td>The situation of women behind the text</td>
<td>Feminist Criticism, in combination with one of the above</td>
<td>Much like Social-scientific criticism, in that your goal is to learn about the social situation of a particular group; usually combined with another method that helps you collect data (e.g., redaction criticism would illuminate how and why Luke changes the presentation of women in his gospel; feminist insights would help you to explore the “why” question further)</td>
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Once you have determined your passage and question/method, ask yourself the following questions:

- What will you need to know?
- What is your strategy for finding out what you need to know?
  - What sources will you consult and how will you locate them?
  - How will you evaluate their credibility and usefulness?
  - How will you keep track of the information you learn?
Tools for Jump-Starting Your Source Collection

Begin with a recent, one-volume commentary on the Bible like the New Jerome Biblical Commentary, a single volume commentary on your chosen book, and perhaps a recent biblical dictionary or encyclopedia. Look up your passage/topic, get a general overview of the issues that scholars have discussed, and raid the notes and bibliography for the seminal works on the passage/topic. This is the best way for novice exegetes to determine quickly the most important works on your topic. The Research tab on the course web site has a link along the top called “Scripture Tools” that describes each of these resources and lists the particular titles our library has.

The next step is to go to New Testament Abstracts. Look up articles and books on your passage over the last 5 years. Read the abstracts about relevant English-language titles. If it looks like they might be useful, make note of them, and then hunt them down in the library. Also useful is the online ATLA Religion Database. While it lacks abstracts or online copies of the articles, it does provide easy search options for finding articles on your topic or passage. Again, both resources are described at the “Scripture Tools” page on the course web site.

Generating a Thesis

After you have collected and read your sources, revisit your original question. How would you answer it now? This (provisional) answer is your thesis. Your thesis may still change as you write your rough draft, because the writing process often allows you to work out your ideas one step further, and so you might find yourself refining or altering your answer.

Outlining your Exegetical Paper

Once you’ve generated a thesis or answer to your question, you are ready to outline and write your paper. The paper is your presentation of your thesis and your supporting argument for it. In this class, the paper also includes a final two-page reflection on the passage that explores how you would apply insights of the paper in a pastoral setting (sharing the faith, designing social service/justice projects, teaching or leading in prayer).

There are two major parts of your exegetical paper, the exegesis or close reading of your passage and the pastoral application. Because the pastoral application is best served by the best possible exegesis, and because you won’t have too many opportunities to do exegesis in the Pastoral Ministries Program, I would like to see only 2-3 pages devoted to pastoral application, the rest to your exegesis.

As for the 8-10 pages of exegesis, the outline will depend upon the method you choose. Use the Exegesis tab at the course web site to determine the steps of your method. Also use your secondary sources as guides to how the various methods actually look in practice. Use the 8-10 pages to walk the reader through your close reading of the text in the steps of the method you’ve chosen.

For example, if you choose redaction criticism as your method, the steps are to describe the method in a paragraph after your introductory paragraph, identify the similarities and differences between a single later editor and his source (Mark and/or Q), then to propose and defend a thesis about why the author has altered his source in the way that he has and what this reveals about his theological interests. These two chunks would be 4-5 pages each. Then it is these theological changes/interests and the questions they might prompt in a contemporary community that become the basis for your final two pages of pastoral application.

If you want to develop an outline for your paper, feel free to do so and to run it by the professor.
Summary of the Process

- What New Testament passage will you focus on?
- What question do you want to answer?
- What method(s) will you use to answer that question?
- What will you need to know?
- What is your strategy for finding out what you need to know?
  - What sources will you consult and how will you locate them?
  - How will you evaluate their credibility and usefulness?
  - How will you keep track of the information you learn?
- After reading your sources, what is your answer to your question (your thesis)?
- How will you present your case or organize your research to demonstrate that answer/thesis?
  - What will the general shape of your outline be?
  - How/where will you integrate your sources (you want to use proofs or well-worded passages from other authors, but still control the presentation in terms of your thesis)?
  - How will you deal with information that contradicts your thesis?
- On what insight from your research will your reflection/pastoral application be based?