

# WHAT IS EXEGESIS? AN ANALYSIS OF VARIOUS DEFINITIONS

STANLEY E. PORTER AND KENT D. CLARKE

## INTRODUCTION

It is an unseasonably beautiful day in June and a student, wanting much more to be out kicking a football—or anywhere other than where he is—enters to write a final examination paper in biblical studies. With some anxiety he sits down and at the proper moment flings open the exam paper and stares intently at the first question. It innocently reads: ‘Biblical Passages: Exegete\* fully the prologue to John’s Gospel (1:1-18). Remember to make your answer clear and well-organized, showing a coherent train of thought and referring to major scholars and their opinions.’ A wry smile crosses our unlikely hero’s face, as he remembers several lectures on the prologue, as well as a number of other articles and books he has perused, for he actually knows something about this passage. He begins to formulate an answer. Perhaps the best place to start is with an analysis of the term λόγος. He remembers the lengthy and insightful section in Raymond Brown’s commentary on the Jewish background to the concept of ‘the Word’.<sup>1</sup> Since Christianity is often considered to be a Jewish sect, closely tied to the Old Testament, this might be the best way to proceed. Besides, it would certainly fill a few pages. But wait. There is also the work of C.H. Dodd on the Greek philosophical background to the concept of ‘the Word’.<sup>2</sup> That might be the best way to approach the answer, since the Gospel of John was originally written in Greek, takes notice of other Greek elements in Jesus’ ministry, and reflects a religious group that was spread throughout the Greco-Roman world. Then again, perhaps he should answer as do Hoskyns and Davey in their commentary on John, laying out the evidence for both sides.<sup>3</sup> But

\* Use of “exegete” as a verb is now common on examination papers.

<sup>1</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (2 vols.; AB, 29, 29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 519-24.

<sup>2</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), pp. 263-85.

<sup>3</sup> E. Hoskyns and F.N. Davey, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1947), pp. 154-63.

that commentary was, at least in his opinion, a disappointment, for the very reason that it did not make up its mind. A sense of unease comes over our studious friend as small beads of sweat begin to form on his brow and upper lip, and he begins to twist nervously in his seat. 'But this is just background material anyway', he thinks. One of his and other students' most frequent complaints is that the lecturers spend so much time talking about the material behind the text that they never get to the text itself. Perhaps another tack will provide the answer. In a more recent article, Frank Kermode, the literary scholar, picks up long-heard rumblings about the use of the verb 'was' and pursues this as the unifying thread to John's prologue, weaving together various narrative intrusions.<sup>4</sup> But how, our now panicking examinee thinks, does this square with Eugene Nida's structural analysis of John 1:1-5, which uses instead of the verb 'was' a series of repetitions in chiasmic order as pivotal points for analysis?<sup>5</sup> Both of these promise interesting answers, but then, hadn't he heard one of the lecturers make the comment that all this new literary stuff was no substitution for exegesis? Glancing at his watch to see how much time he has lost, our now depressed student moves on to the second question: 'Reconstruct the historical background of 1 Corinthians...' and breathes a sigh of relief.

#### EXEGESIS DEFINED

##### *Broader Definition and Synonyms*

Exegesis comprises the most important task of the study of the New Testament (Conzelmann and Lindemann 1988: 1). At the same time, there are few terms in biblical studies like 'exegesis' that are used so freely and represent so many different things to various scholars and students. Thus the plight of our industrious student above. Part of the term's perceived ambiguity may reside in its often synonymous relationship to a number of other words such as 'interpretation' and 'hermeneutics'. Broadly speaking, all three terms fall under the discipline of 'heuristics' (Greek εὐρίσκω which not only meant 'find' or 'come upon', but could also refer to an intellectual discovery based upon reflection, observation, examination, or investigation), that is, the study and development of methods or principles that aid one in

<sup>4</sup> F. Kermode, 'St John as Poet', *JSNT* 28 (1986), pp. 3-16.

<sup>5</sup> E.A. Nida *et al.*, *Style and Discourse* (New York: Bible Society, 1983), pp. 112-16.

discovering the sense and meaning of a text.

Hermeneutics (Greek ἑρμηνεύω which meant to translate, explain, interpret, or even proclaim) can be widely defined as the attempt to understand anything that somebody else has said or written (Marshall 1979: 11). And, although hermeneutics has classically referred to the science of formulating guidelines, laws, and methods for interpreting an original author's meaning, more recently, the term has been more narrowly restricted to the elucidation of a text's meaning for a contemporary audience. Anthony Thiselton clarifies this point:

Traditionally hermeneutics entailed the formulation of rules for the understanding of an ancient text, especially in linguistic and historical terms. The interpreter was urged to begin with the language of the text, including its grammar, vocabulary, and style. He examined its linguistic, literary, and historical context. In other words, traditional hermeneutics began with the recognition that a text was conditioned by a given historical context. However, hermeneutics in the more recent sense of the term begins with the recognition that historical conditioning is two-sided: *the modern interpreter, no less than the text, stands in a given historical context and tradition* (Thiselton 1980: 11).<sup>6</sup>

The term exegesis, like hermeneutics, has also been broadly defined as a normal activity in which all of us are engaged from day to day. Hayes and Holladay explain that 'Whenever we hear an oral statement or read a written one and seek to understand what has been said, we are engaging in exegesis' (Hayes and Holladay 1987: 5). The word exegesis itself is derived from the Greek term ἐξηγέομαι, which literally meant 'lead out of'. When applied to written texts the word referred to the 'reading out' of the text's meaning. More generally, exegesis also meant to explain, interpret, tell, report, or describe. And, once again like hermeneutics, exegesis classically referred to the articulation or discovery of a text's meaning based on the understanding of the original author's intentions and goals.

Lastly, the word interpretation (Latin *interpretari* which meant to explain, translate, or understand) is often used interchangeably with the words hermeneutics and exegesis. Such is the case with Gerhard Ebeling who asserts that these three terms are in fact synonyms. Ebeling adds further that 'the words "interpretation" and "hermeneutics" at bottom mean the same', and later goes on to say, 'Hermeneutics therefore, in order to be an aid to interpretation, must

<sup>6</sup> For similar definitions of the term hermeneutics, see Fee 1993: 27; and Osborne 1991: 5.

itself be interpretation' (Ebeling 1963: 321). C.F. Evans takes a similar stance when he states that hermeneutics 'is only another word for exegesis or interpretation'.<sup>7</sup>

Given the close resemblance in meaning of these three terms, it is not surprising that the word exegesis is so diversely applied or that its technical meaning is so difficult to establish. There are, however, a number of helpful distinctions that can be made in order to bring at least some clarification to our discussion and definition of the exegetical task. To begin with, the term interpretation is often used in a less technical and more general sense than either of the words exegesis or hermeneutics. Whereas the objects of interpretation can be various forms of oral, gestural, symbolic, and written communication, the object of exegesis and hermeneutics is more often equated with written data. One might say that interpretation, being the broadest of the three terms, incorporates both hermeneutics and exegesis as sub-categories (see Morgan and Barton 1988: 1-5; and Thiselton 1980: 10). Continuing to work from general to specific, the next term to follow is hermeneutics, which refers to the over-arching theories or philosophies that guide exegesis. And finally, exegesis, the most specific of the three terms, refers to the actual practice, procedures, and methods one uses to understand a text (see Osborne 1991: 5). Exegesis is concerned with the actual interpretation and understanding of the text, whereas hermeneutics is concerned with the nature of the interpretative process and the conditions to which basic understanding is to be subjected (Conzelmann and Lindemann 1988: 1). Exegesis concludes by saying, 'This passage means such and such'; hermeneutics ends by saying, 'This interpretative process is constituted by the following techniques and pre-understandings' (Carson 1984: 22-23).

#### *Traditional Definition*

As briefly mentioned, exegesis has been traditionally defined as the process by which a reader seeks to discover the meaning of a text *via* an understanding of the original author's intentions in that text. The classic goal of exegesis has been to articulate the meaning of a passage as the original writer intended it to be understood by his or her contemporary audience. Thus R.T. France (Marshall 1979: 252) understands exegesis as 'the discovery of what the text means in itself,

<sup>7</sup> C.F. Evans, *Is 'Holy Scripture' Christian?* (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 31.

that is, the original intention of the writer, and the meaning the passage would have held for the readers for whom it was first intended'. R.P. Martin similarly asserts that 'to practice exegesis in regard to the New Testament literature is to enquire what was the meaning intended by the original authors... This is to be the interpreter's primary aim, requiring that his approach to Scripture be one of honest enquiry and a determined effort to find out the intended meaning of the author for his day' (Marshall 1979: 220). And finally, like France and Martin, G.D. Fee explains in his handbook to New Testament exegesis,

The term 'exegesis' is used...in a consciously limited sense to refer to the historical investigation into the meaning of the biblical text. Exegesis, therefore, answers the question, What *did* the biblical author *mean*? It has to do both with *what* he said (the content itself) and why he said it at any given point (the literary context). Furthermore, exegesis is primarily concerned with intentionality: What did the author *intend* his original readers to understand? (Fee 1993: 27).

Exegesis of this nature has often been called 'grammatico-historical exegesis', or simply 'historical exegesis'. More technically, exegesis that concerns itself solely with historical background, the original author's intentions, and the ancient audience's understanding of these intentions has been termed 'exegesis proper'. The underlying hermeneutical philosophies of grammatico-historical exegesis began to be formulated as early as 1788 by the Leipzig theologian Karl Keil. Keil explained that, to interpret an author meant nothing more than to teach what meaning he intended to convey, or to assure that, when reading a work, the interpreter would think the same things as the author initially conceived. Interpreters were not to concern themselves about the nature of what the original author wrote—whether the words were true or false—but only to understand what was spoken by that author. Keil believed that the function of the interpreter closely resembled that of the historian, for just as the historian seeks to unbiasedly determine what has been done by another, without casting judgment on that event, so too the interpreter must concentrate attention on the author in order that he or she may know and explain to others what was earlier said and written by someone else. That the interpreter differentiates between sacred or profane writers Keil thought was inappropriate, since the writers of Scripture were to be understood in no other way than as human authors. For Keil it was the task of the theologian to consider what value was to be ascribed to the

opinions expounded by the sacred writers, what authority was to be attributed to them in the present age, and in what manner they were to be contemporized. In the words of Keil, however, the task of the exegete consisted only in making plain what was handed down by the biblical authors: 'In the case of a sacred no less than a profane author it is the task of the interpreter to bring to light what the author himself thought as he wrote, what meaning is suggested by his own discourse, and what he wished his readers to understand' (Kümmel 1973: 108-109). Grammatico-historical exegesis of this fashion required that a single and definite sense be assigned by the interpreter to the author's words and sentences.

In 1799, soon after Keil wrote, standing on the presupposition that the biblical authors were to be explained just as the profane, without taking the divine revelation of the Scriptures into consideration, and emphasizing a more literal interpretation, G.L. Bauer wrote:

The only valid principle of interpretation, whether the author be profane or biblical, is this: Every book must be explained in accordance with the linguistic peculiarities that characterize it; this means grammatical interpretation and results in a literal understanding of the text; and the presentation and clarification of the ideas that appear in it, ideas dependent on the customs and the way of thinking of the author himself and of his age, his nation, sect, religion, and so forth, is the task of what is called historical interpretation (Kümmel 1973: 112).

Further separation of the theological from the historical within exegesis can be clearly seen in individuals like Heinrich Meyer, who, in 1829, wrote in his *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*:

The area of dogmatics and philosophy is to remain off limits for a commentary. For to ascertain the meaning the author intended to convey by his words, impartially and historico-grammatically—that is the duty of the exegete. How the meaning so ascertained stands in relation to the teachings of philosophy, to what extent it agrees with the dogmas of the church or with the views of its theologians, in what way the dogmatician is to make use of it in the interest of his science—to the exegete as an exegete, all that is a matter of no concern (Kümmel 1973: 111).

Although in recent years many of the more radical maxims of grammatico-historical exegesis have been tempered—or at least advocates of the approach have been more willing to admit that a number of larger hermeneutical questions cannot be so easily answered by the method—there remain numerous biblical scholars

who wish to preserve the stringent historicity and a-theological stance that grammatico-historical exegesis has promoted. As we shall see below, however, there are a number of difficulties with many of the planks of this interpretative model.

#### *Traditional Definition Questioned*

Whereas the emphasis of grammatico-historical exegesis has focused upon what the biblical text originally *meant*, it has been more recently argued that the exegetical task should, and even must, be expanded to include both what the text *has meant* (i.e. its history of interpretation) and what the text *means* (i.e. its relevance for today). Individuals like Werner Stenger divide exegesis into three sub-disciplines: (1) those methods that seek to describe a text's *linguistic form* and underlying structures, (2) those methods that look into the circumstances surrounding a text's *origin* and seek to identify its original addressees, and (3) those methods that investigate the *reception* a text has had in the course of its history and still has in the present. Stenger's close proximity to traditional grammatico-historical exegesis, however, cannot be missed as he claims that

...this third group of methods—when the text in question is the New Testament—is the task of every theological discipline, including ethics. Therefore, we must understand the specific discipline of *New Testament* exegesis as obligated in particular to describe the text's linguistic form and investigate the circumstances of its origin. New Testament exegesis is thus directed primarily toward *philological* and *historical* goals, and within this dual focus is called *historical-critical* exegesis (Stenger 1993: 3).

Others, like W.G. Kümmel, still indebted to grammatico-historical exegesis, seem more willing to allow for a balance of interests within the exegetical task. Kümmel emphasizes that New Testament exegetes must keep in mind which of two possible ways of asking questions they will use in dealing with a particular exegetical problem. First, one may intend to learn from the text what it says about the historical circumstances at the time of its composition, its author, the readers for whom it was intended, the intellectual milieu from which it originated, and the external or internal history of primitive Christianity. Secondly, one may intend to discover the objective meaning of the text, that is, to learn from the text what it says about the subject matter discussed in it, and what this means for the interpreter personally (Kaiser and Kümmel 1981: 43-44). Like Kümmel, Dieter Lührmann sees exegesis as the attempt to answer two different questions: 'What is in the text?', and 'What does the text tell me?' (Lührmann 1989: 17).

*Alternative Methods of Exegesis*

Rather than merely tinkering with the historically-grounded grammatico-historical method, a number of recent biblical interpreters have claimed to overthrow its major assumptions. They have rejected many of its historically-based presuppositions, and have chosen to emphasize other exegetical criteria. We are grouping these exegetical methods together in this programmatic opening chapter, but they are in fact quite diverse, developing in some instances out of reaction to traditional exegesis and in others out of other intellectual disciplines. As a result, several of them have warranted their own separate chapters in this volume, where more comprehensive discussion can take place. The alternative forms of exegesis represented here include discourse analysis, a form of exegesis dependent upon many of the valuable insights of modern linguistics; rhetorical and narratological criticism, with its historical roots in a historically-grounded criticism, but much of its current practice relying upon modern literary conceptions; literary criticism, which remains a tremendously wide and diverse field; ideological criticisms, including such things as liberation and gender-based criticism; social-scientific criticism, taking its cue directly from recent work in the social sciences; and canonical criticism, directly reflecting concerns with the canon not so much in its historical dimensions but as an artifact of the Church. Only a few volumes on exegesis include discussion of these topics (see Hayes and Holladay 1987: 73-82, 110-30), although we suspect that future treatment of the subject of exegesis will need to address directly how these alternative forms of criticism have in fact become part of the mainstream (see Porter and Tombs 1995).

These criticisms deserve to have their place in the mainstream, rather than remaining on the periphery, where they are often viewed as an added extra to interesting exegesis by practitioners of more traditional methods (see Watson 1993). As the following discussion makes clear, there are a number of problem areas in traditional exegesis that these alternative forms of criticism have already or definitionally addressed, and from which traditional exegesis could rightly learn much. For example, literary criticism, as it has been appropriated for New Testament criticism, places exegetical emphasis not on historical origins, but on the final form of the text, attempting to overcome the problem of historical distance through definition.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in*

Canonical criticism faces the reality that so little is known about such basic questions as the authorship of even New Testament books, and relies upon the canonical status of these books as its most important interpretative and exegetical context.<sup>9</sup>

## ISSUES AND DIFFICULTIES ARISING OUT OF EXEGESIS

Already one can glimpse some of the issues and difficulties inherent to a discussion of the exegetical task. Clearly, reading and understanding the biblical text differs in degree and complexity from how one would read a personal letter from a close friend, the morning newspaper, or the most recent novel to appear on the book stand. A number of the major reasons for this difference in exegetical approach are briefly mentioned below.<sup>10</sup>

*The Problem of History*

By widening the exegetical task to include both what the text meant in the past and what it means in the present, one introduces a complicated dialectic that is difficult to map out. Related to this is the distinction between 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' exegetical approaches.<sup>11</sup> The goal of the former is to describe a text on the basis of its coherence, structure, and function as it exists in its final form. The goal of the latter is to explain the historical events and processes that brought the text to this form. Exegesis that seeks to answer what the text *means* at present is usually based upon the synchronic

*Western Literature* (trans. W.R. Trask; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, B.S. Childs's canonical approach in *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979); and *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994 [1984]).

<sup>10</sup> Concerning biblical interpretation, Thiselton groups the majority of hermeneutical and exegetical difficulties into three helpful categories, including (1) the problem of historical distance between ourselves and the biblical writers, (2) problems concerning the role of theology in interpretation, and (3) problems in the relationship between hermeneutics and language (Thiselton 1980: xi, xix).

<sup>11</sup> These words draw on the terminology of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) who is generally regarded as the father of modern linguistics. See Part 2 and Part 3 of his *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. R. Harris; London: Duckworth, 1983), pp. 99-187. The most reliable and complete edition is that by R. Engler, *Edition critique du 'Cours de linguistique générale' de F. de Saussure* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1967).

condition of the text, that is, *what it is*. On the other hand, exegesis that concerns itself with what the text *meant* relies more heavily upon the diachronic condition of the text, that is, *how it came to be what it is* (Stenger 1993: 26).<sup>12</sup>

The difficulty in bridging this gap exists for a number of reasons. First, the New Testament was not originally written in or to modern society. Instead, it was addressed to specific ancient audiences such as, in the case of Luke–Acts, the individual designated Theophilus; and in the case of the Pauline letters, churches such as those in Galatia, Philippi, and Thessalonica, and individuals such as Philemon, and perhaps Timothy and Titus. Hayes and Holladay rightly state, ‘as students interpreting biblical materials we are, in a sense, third-party intruders and suffer from third-party perspectives’ (Hayes and Holladay 1987: 15).

Secondly, the original biblical manuscripts were composed in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—all languages very different from contemporary English. Therefore, anyone who comes to the biblical text as an exegete must either rely upon second-hand translations (which are in a very real sense already interpretations) or, ideally, spend the necessary time and effort to learn these ancient languages. Even so, because these ancient languages are no longer spoken or written as they were in biblical times, they become impossible to fully master as a native speaker.

Thirdly, there is an enormous historical separation of almost two-thousand years between the New Testament authors and addressees and our present day. Although this historical distance frees the biblical texts from arbitrary interpretations and allows them to speak with their own voice, it can also prevent them from being relevant for us. Since they are objects from the past, these texts are often made to speak only to the past; therefore, they can fall silent when confronted with modern questions (Stenger 1993: 5). This separation may also result in ambiguity regarding the aims, goals, and intentions of the biblical writers and their audiences. In light of this, some even question the legitimacy of beginning exegesis with the study of the original author’s intent:

<sup>12</sup> Stenger makes the interesting point that ‘The sequence of synchronic and diachronic modes of observation is not arbitrary: *Before* the question of *how the text has come to be* (diachronic study) stands the question of *what it is* at a given point in time (synchronic study)’ (Stenger 1993: 26 and n. 4).

Modern critics increasingly deny the very possibility of discovering the original, or intended, meaning of a text. The problem is that while the original authors had a definite meaning in mind when they wrote, that is now lost to us because they are no longer present to clarify and explain what they wrote. The modern reader cannot study the text from the ancient perspective but constantly reads into that passage modern perspectives. Therefore, critics argue, objective interpretation is impossible and the author’s intended meaning is forever lost to us (Osborne 1991: 7).

Fourthly, not only is there an immense historical gap, but this historical gap is further compounded by the huge cultural gap that exists between the New Testament writers and modern day readers, particularly those in western society. Customs and manners, medicine and technology, human rights, legal codes, and world and cosmological views—just to name a few broad cultural constructs—are considerably different.

Fifthly, the growth and expansion of biblical traditions, the work of later biblical editors, and the emergence of textual accretions add to the dilemma. It is well argued that pericopes such as the Markan resurrection narrative (Mark 16:9-20) and the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11) are later expansions of the biblical tradition, which appeared after the original works of the particular author. Therefore, it becomes even more difficult to speak of the intentions of the original writers, and this subsequently serves to further complicate attempts at traversing the chasm that exists between what a biblical text meant in its original setting and what it means today. Adding to this, the oldest biblical manuscripts that we have are copies made quite some time after the original documents were written. Of the more than 5000 New Testament biblical manuscripts in our possession (none of which are identical), the earliest, a small papyrus fragment containing John 18:31-33 and John 18:37-38, dates to c. 125 CE. The earliest complete manuscript of the New Testament, Codex Sinaiticus, dates only to the fourth century CE.

#### *The Problem of Presuppositions*

While Lührmann explains that the basic problem of exegesis can be framed within two questions, ‘What happened?’ and ‘What must I do?’, he adds that one’s approach to these questions is shaped by the traditions from which one comes and in which one has learned to read the biblical texts, and also by the discussion of these traditions and the role which the texts play, depending on whether they are felt to be threatening or liberating. He is correct in saying that this is above all

connected with the question of the status of the biblical texts—whether they are understood as a primary orientation for life; as legitimation of one's own, a group's, one's parents, one's community's, or one's church's ways of life, all of which are open to criticism; as part of the condition of the world in which we live; or any other possibilities one might think of (Lührmann 1989: 17-18). In making these statements, Lührmann introduces another of the difficult issues arising out of exegesis, that of the exegete's presuppositions.

Grammatico-historical exegesis has often been promoted as a method of superlative objectivity. Grammatico-historical exegetes have promoted the idea that they approach the biblical text without any prior understanding of its meaning. The mind of the interpreter is to be a 'blank tablet' (*tabula rasa*), in order that the true and genuine sense of Scripture can show through. The theory is that, by placing themselves into the context, setting, and world of the ancient authors and readers, biblical exegetes are able to view the text from the original perspective, while at the same time suppressing any modern opinions or biases that might affect their interpretation.

Desirability aside, is this type of objective exegesis attainable? In his famous essay, 'Is Interpretation without Presuppositions Possible?', Rudolf Bultmann tackles this complex question. On the one hand, he asserts that exegesis without presuppositions is not only possible but demanded if 'without presuppositions' means 'without presupposing the results of exegesis'. In other words, exegesis must be without prejudice. On the other hand, Bultmann emphasizes that

*no exegesis is without presuppositions, inasmuch as the exegete is not a tabula rasa, but on the contrary, approaches the text with specific questions or with a specific way of raising questions and thus has a certain idea of the subject matter with which the text is concerned (Bultmann 1960: 289).*

The biblical text cannot be read from a neutral stance, regardless of how desirous the exegete is to accomplish this goal. Not only is every exegete determined by his or her own individuality, special biases, habits, gifts and weaknesses, but, in reading a text, the interpreter must formulate an initial understanding of what the text is saying. This must then be verified by the text itself. The reader must have at least some initial idea of or point of reference to the text and what the author is talking about before understanding can take place. Bultmann hastens to add that the historical method of exegesis in itself has several presuppositions, including the presupposition that

history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect... This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers and that therefore there is no 'miracle' in this sense of the word. Such a miracle would be an event whose cause did not lie within history (Bultmann 1960: 291-92).

Rather than deny one's presuppositions in the struggle to attain the facade of ideal objectivity in exegesis, the interpreter must, in the words of Conzelmann and Lindemann,

ask (or be asked) about the presuppositions he brings to the text. What tradition is in his background? What questions does he expect the text to answer? Why indeed does he even deal with this text? It would be wrong to move the encounter between exegete and text to a 'neutral zone', as if there were, on the one side, a text of timeless value (at any rate) and devoid of history (possibly) and, on the other side, an exegete who approaches the text free of all presuppositions. There is no exegesis without presuppositions. Each interpretation is at least influenced by the exegete's own historical setting. Therefore, he must first of all be clear about the presuppositions he brings along. One should not understand this in terms of psychological introspection. Rather, it is essential to determine one's own position, so that the exegete does not yield to an inappropriate identification between what the text says and the exegete's predetermined expectations (Conzelmann and Lindemann 1988: 2).<sup>13</sup>

### *The Problem of Theology*

Perhaps the most controversial current problem inherent to a discussion of the exegetical task, and one that has already been touched upon in the two previous sections concerning history and presuppositions, is the question of theology and its place within biblical interpretation. More specifically, this has been referred to as the dilemma between descriptive (non-confessional) and prescriptive (confessional) approaches to exegesis. That the Bible is considered by many to be a sacred religious text hardly needs to be said. However, for most Christian believers, this 'sacredness' implies a number of faith assumptions: (1) in some shape or form the Bible is thought to record the word(s) of God, (2) more so than other writings, the Bible

<sup>13</sup> The most influential and noteworthy twentieth-century investigation of the role of prejudice and pre-understanding in the reading of texts is that of H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad; London: Sheed and Ward, 2nd edn, 1989).

is considered to embody a truer or better reflection and more accurate representation of reality, (3) the degree of authority attached to the Bible by individuals and communities supersedes that of any other literary text, and (4) the Bible is ascribed a central role in informing and guiding the faith and practice of these individuals and communities. According to a prescriptive approach to exegesis, these assumptions play at least some part in the interpretative process as exegetes seek to explain the biblical text within the context of their faith community. The task of exegesis is not simply to describe the text's historical meaning, but to stand under its authority as well. Unfortunately, this type of special hermeneutic can run the risk of ending up simply pointing out what the exegete already knew, a process often called *eisegesis* ('reading into' the text), rather than *exegesis* ('reading out from' the text). Nietzsche's forceful complaint regarding the theologian applies equally well here:

Another mark of the theologian is his *incapacity for philology*. Philology is to be understood here in a very wide sense as the art of reading well—of being able to read off a fact *without* falsifying it by interpretation, *without* losing caution, patience, subtlety, in the desire for understanding. Philology as *ephexis* [undecisiveness] in interpretation: whether it be a question of books, newspaper reports, fate or the weather—to say nothing of the 'salvation of the soul'... The way in which a theologian, no matter whether in Berlin or in Rome, interprets a 'word of Scriptures', or an experience... is always so *audacious* as to make a philologist run up every wall in sight.<sup>14</sup>

The descriptive approach to exegesis is best exemplified in the grammatico-historical method's emphasis upon what the text meant. And, as we have already seen, in its attempt to place objective distance between text and reader, the basic tenets of grammatico-historical exegesis are often perceived as being in contention with the more theologically-sensitive concerns of a prescriptive approach. Some of these tenets would include (1) a tendency to emphasize what the text meant while excluding its present meaning, (2) treating the Bible in the same fashion as one would treat any other work of ancient literature, (3) a difficulty in affirming the supernatural or miraculous in the biblical text (although, it must be said, this last point applies more to certain radical forms of grammatico-historical exegesis). Perhaps the classic statement on the problem raised by descriptive

<sup>14</sup> F. Nietzsche, 'The Anti-Christ', in *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* (trans. R.J. Hollingdale; London: Penguin, 1968), pp. 169-70.

exegesis comes from Albert Schweitzer:

The study of the Life of Jesus has had a curious history. It set out in quest of the historical Jesus, believing that when it had found Him it could bring Him straight into our time as a Teacher and Savior. It loosed the bands by which He had been riveted for centuries to the stony rocks of ecclesiastical doctrine, and rejoiced to see life and movement coming into the figure once more, and the historical Jesus advancing, as it seemed, to meet it. But He does not stay; He passes by our time and returns to His own. What surprised and dismayed the theology of the last forty years was that, despite all forced and arbitrary interpretations, it could not keep Him in our time, but had to let Him go. He returned to His own time, not owing to the application of any historical ingenuity, but by the same inevitable necessity by which the liberated pendulum returns to its original position.<sup>15</sup>

Not only is the Bible an ancient record of past communities, and in this sense historical, it is also a modern record to present communities, and in this sense theological. The distinction between the role of the exegete as a proclaimer of what the text meant, and the role of the theologian as a proclaimer of what the text means, illustrates the primary issue at the heart of biblical interpretation today. As Stenger has said, exegesis 'continually breaks its teeth on this hard nut—to the extent that it is pursued honestly' (Stenger 1993: 7).

Like our earlier student examinee, it is easy for one to be overwhelmed by the exegetical task, especially given the above discussion and in light of the various difficulties that have emerged from it. However, as Hayes and Holladay point out, one does not approach the task of biblical exegesis *de nova*:

Thousands of others throughout the centuries have interpreted the Bible, prepared tools available to the contemporary interpreter, and developed methods of approaching the problems and issues involved. Probably no other book has been so studied as the Bible, and tools for such study have been prepared by scholars who have spent their lives engaged in biblical exegesis and interpretation (Hayes and Holladay 1987: 18).

## CONCLUSION

As this chapter has shown, and as is exemplified throughout this entire book, exegesis is no one single thing, but rather a complex and

<sup>15</sup> A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: A. & C. Black, 2nd edn, 1945), p. 397.



multifaceted collection of disciplines. The approach or orientation one takes to exegesis, which is most often determined by the particular interests of the interpreter and the questions brought to the text, may only constitute one part of the whole exegetical task. For the linguist, exegesis becomes an analysis of lexis and grammar. For the historical critic, exegesis concerns itself with uncovering ancient backgrounds and original intentions. The theologian embraces exegesis in order to aid in the contemporization of traditions and doctrines that will continually speak in a new and vital way to present believers. The fact is that there are various aspects of a text's meaning and different types of exegesis can address these various aspects. For this reason, the exegete can never hope to present *the* exegesis of a passage as if it were the final word. Rather, one does an exegesis of a passage in which a coherent and informed interpretation is presented, based upon that interpreter's encounter with and investigation of a text at a given point in time.

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THE BASIC TOOLS OF EXEGESIS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT:  
A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

STANLEY E. PORTER

Bibliographies are helpful tools to provide acquaintance with a subject area, but they are often not as helpful in providing an idea of what a given entry might contain, or the perspective that it takes. An annotated bibliography can often be more helpful, if the comments provided are useful in describing the given sources.<sup>1</sup> However, there is still the question of how these resources might relate to each other, apart from simply falling into the same broad category. This bibliographical essay selects a limited number of sources for comment. It does not attempt to be exhaustive, but to be thorough enough to provide a reasonable idea of the kinds of sources available, and their strengths and limitations in relation to the other possible sources. The essay provides comments on works of exegetical method and those concerned with the basic pillars of exegesis, language and context, placing them alongside works that survey the prior history of interpretation. Sources that build upon these basic sources can be found in the individual essays in the rest of this volume.

1. EXEGETICAL METHOD

The first essay in this volume offers one perspective on the complex task of exegesis. It is notoriously difficult to define exegesis. For those who have attempted a definition of method, this definition has often been too narrow and limited, concentrating upon a restricted number of components. Sometimes these strictures have limited the usefulness of the exegetical conclusions because the methods have failed to confront important historical questions. With the advent of a greater number of critical methods, and re-assessment of the relationship between language and context (and context can be broadly defined), explicit and implicit definitions of exegesis have been reconsidered. This includes reformulating exegesis in such a way that the full range

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<sup>1</sup> For one recent attempt, with reference to further sources that cannot be included in this essay, see S.E. Porter and L.M. McDonald, *New Testament Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

of interpretative models, including traditional higher criticism, have a place. Arguably the best single handbook—though fairly brief at virtually every point—is H. Conzelmann and A. Lindemann, *Interpreting the New Testament: An Introduction to the Principles and Methods of New Testament Exegesis* (trans. S.S. Schatzmann; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988). Its major limitation is that it does not treat most of the newer methods of interpretation, but it does fully integrate the range of higher criticisms into the exegetical enterprise.

A number of guides have traditionally been available to introduce exegetical method to the student. Most of these are brief even to the point of being simplistic. One of the earliest was O. Kaiser and W.G. Kümmel, *Exegetical Method: A Student's Handbook* (trans. E.V.N. Goetchius and M.J. O'Connell; New York: Seabury, 2nd edn, 1981). It includes discussion of both Old and New Testament exegesis, and the extended example of Romans 5 for New Testament exegesis remains insightful. Similar but more recent is J.H. Hayes and C.R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook* (Atlanta: John Knox; London: SCM Press, 2nd edn, 1987), which includes brief discussions of literary criticism, structuralism and canon, besides the standard historical criticisms. Fuller discussion of many modern interpretative methods is found in C. Tuckett, *Reading the New Testament: Methods of Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1987), but proponents of many of these methods may not agree with all of Tuckett's descriptions and assessments. W. Stenger, *Introduction to New Testament Exegesis* (trans. D.W. Scott; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), applies brief comments on method to ten New Testament passages, thus exemplifying exegesis. D. Lührmann, *An Itinerary for New Testament Study* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International; London: SCM Press, 1989), is an attempt at a comprehensive guide, including discussion of several forms of theology. The discussion of exegesis is too brief to provide a useful programme, and hence may not provide the necessary foundation for doing theology. However, comments on theology are not usually found in an introduction to exegesis.

There are also several more theologically conservative guides to exegesis and New Testament interpretation, often with direct application to preaching, including G.E. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), S. McKnight (ed.), *Introducing New Testament Interpretation* (Guides to New Testament Exegesis; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), G.D. Fee, *New Testament*

*Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press; Leominster: Gracewing, 2nd edn, 1993), and W.C. Kaiser, Jr, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981). The best such volume is probably still the one by I.H. Marshall (ed.), *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), because it provides a host of excellent articles by a number of accomplished scholars, arranged in a useful format. A recent attempt to bring discussion up to date is J.B. Green (ed.), *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Exeter: Paternoster, 1995). This volume includes essays on more recent developments not included in Marshall's volume, as well as articles on the expected traditional subjects. Of many volumes in this genre (many of which are best forgotten), one further worth noting is S.L. McKenzie and S.R. Haynes (eds.), *To Each its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and their Application* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993). Very provocative, as well as highly entertaining, is D.A. Carson's *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2nd edn, 1996). He classifies a range of potential and actual exegetical mistakes under four categories—lexicography, grammar, logic and historical method. This is an intriguing book, not least because it shows how easy it is to make serious exegetical mistakes. Beware that you are not included in a subsequent edition!

## 2. HERMENEUTICS

One of the most important hermeneutical questions was posed by R. Bultmann in his essay 'Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?', reprinted in *Existence and Faith: The Shorter Writings of R. Bultmann* (trans. S. Ogden; New York/London: Meridian, 1960), pp. 342-51. His answer was that it was not possible, which meant for him that questions of sound historical method were needed as a guard against unsupported bias. Hermeneutics is one of the fastest-changing fields in New Testament studies. What for years was simply a matter of identifying various figures of speech has become a highly technical and philosophically oriented field of discussion. Some of the technical language introduced in these areas can prove daunting, but a rigorous exegete would be well advised to consider seriously the philosophical and hermeneutical implications of the interpretative task. A reasonable guide into some of these issues is V. Brümmer, *Theology and*

*Philosophical Inquiry: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982). I limit discussion to those works that directly address New Testament interpretation.

Several of the older volumes are still of merit, including E.C. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press; London: Independent Press, 1957), who provides a useful history of interpretation; R.W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic and Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); and P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent* (trans. R.A. Harrisville; Philadelphia: Fortress Press; London: SPCK, 1977). The first is a general survey of the kinds of issues involved in hermeneutics, the second is a collection of highly influential essays, including an introduction to the so-called new hermeneutic, a theologically motivated attempt to come to terms with modern philosophical understanding of the Bible, and the third is a commendable but as yet unrealized attempt to link historical criticism and theology.

The reader would be well advised to note that the modern works on hermeneutics have largely left the earlier treatments behind, however. One of the first volumes in recent times to have a widespread influence on hermeneutical discussion was A.C. Thiselton's *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Exeter: Paternoster, 1980). This is not easy reading, and may not always seem germane to the exegetical task, but the issues raised by the various thinkers surveyed are essential ones. Thiselton has followed up this work with three others, the first written in conjunction with R. Lundin and C. Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Exeter: Paternoster, 1985); the second his *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan; London: HarperCollins, 1992), a volume that advances his own interpretative model based upon speech-act theory, a method from recent discussion in linguistic pragmatics; and the third his *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995). Thiselton offers many provocative interpretations of many of the most important thinkers on hermeneutics for New Testament exegesis. Also of importance is P. Ricoeur's *Essays on*

*Biblical Interpretation* (ed. L.S. Mudge; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), a collection of essays by the French philosopher and literary critic that offers his thoughts on the complexities of biblical interpretation. W. Jeanrond, in *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking* (trans. T.J. Wilson; New York: Crossroad; Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), offers a highly sensible approach to interpretation, appreciating the processes of textual production and reception, and favoring a textually-based linguistic approach. His *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) develops the theological element of hermeneutics. A quick way into some of the discussion is to be found in the collection of important essays by major writers on the subject, compiled by D.K. McKim (ed.), *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

A number of student-oriented introductions to hermeneutics have been recently published. Some of them offer overviews of some of the major issues, often with a distinct slant towards practical exegesis. Volumes that merit mention are those by W.W. Klein, C.L. Blomberg, and R.L. Hubbard with K.A. Ecklebarger, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1992), a highly practical and commonsensical approach to the subject; G.D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2nd edn, 1993), a genre based discussion that perhaps errs on the side of simplicity; W.R. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), reflecting a literary-critical perspective; and G.R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), an exhaustive study that is not always clear on where it comes down on a given issue. A major shortcoming of many of these student-oriented volumes is their tendency to be reductionistic, making it seem as if many of the issues of interpretation are more easily solved than they really are.

### 3. GREEK LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

The study of the Greek language has made major advances in the last decade, although many of them are still unknown to exegetes. Much of this advance has been predicated upon a re-thinking of previous assumptions in the study of Greek, along with attempts to

integrate the best findings of modern linguistic study into an area that has traditionally been controlled by classical philology. The shift has been away from a prescriptive approach based upon only the best literary texts toward description of how language is used in a variety of contexts, especially those that reflect the language of everyday use, such as the documentary papyri of the period. One of the first articles to discuss the place of modern linguistics in biblical exegesis was E.A. Nida, 'The Implications of Contemporary Linguistics for Biblical Scholarship', *JBL* 91 (1972), pp. 73-89. This has now been developed, reflecting more recent research, in S.E. Porter, 'Studying Ancient Languages from a Modern Linguistic Perspective: Essential Terms and Terminology', *FN* 1 (1989), pp. 147-72. There is much work still to be done, and a number of traditional reference tools in the area do not reflect much current thinking. Nevertheless, knowledge of the language of the original text is vitally important for serious exegesis.

There are numerous introductory textbooks available for those who have not yet begun the study of Greek.<sup>2</sup> The basics of the language are, of course, assumed in exegesis of the Greek text, and so discussion here will consider those works that have direct exegetical value. The best book to date on a linguistic approach to exegesis of the Bible, including the New Testament, is probably P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity; London: SPCK, 1989). This volume places linguistic discussion within the demands of the larger hermeneutical task, a framework from which many interpreters could rightly benefit. Also of some value are G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press; London: Duckworth, 1980), and D.A. Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek: A Survey of Basic Concepts and Applications* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988). The first volume takes a more common-sense approach to linguistics than many linguists are happy with, and the second is for intermediate level students.

Most will be familiar with the basic grammatical reference tools for the study of the Greek language, but some comment on their relative merit and usefulness may be in order in light of recent linguistic developments. The oldest of the reference grammars still found in regular use is G.B. Winer's, originally published in German early last

<sup>2</sup> These are surveyed in S.E. Porter, 'Tense Terminology and Greek Language Study: A Linguistic Re-Evaluation', in his *Studies in the Greek New Testament: Theory and Practice* (SBG, 5; New York: Lang, 1996), pp. 39-48.

century and revised several times. It appears in three translations still to be found: *A Treatise on the Grammar of New Testament Greek Regarded as a Sure Basis for New Testament Exegesis* (trans. W.F. Moulton; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 3rd edn, 1882), the mostly widely used, *A Grammar of the New Testament Diction* (trans. E. Masson; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 6th edn, 1866) and *A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament* (trans. J.H. Thayer; Andover: Draper, 1870). Winer's grammar reflects a highly logical and rationalistic approach to Greek, in which, for example, a particular tense-form is to be rigidly equated with a particular temporal value. The most widely used reference grammar for the study of the Greek of the New Testament is that of F. Blass and A. Debrunner, originally published by Blass in 1896 and immediately translated into English (*Grammar of New Testament Greek* [trans. J.H. Thayer; London: Macmillan, 1898]). To be preferred is the English translation of the revised tenth edition: *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (trans. R.W. Funk; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). The work is still in print in German, edited by F. Rehkopf as *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 17th edn, 1990). It reflects the classical philological thinking of late last century, and tends to dwell on points where the Greek of the New Testament differs from classical Greek. This arbitrary enhancement of classical Greek has a tendency to skew one's perspective negatively against the Greek of the New Testament. In contrast to this approach, J.H. Moulton began his *Grammar of New Testament Greek* early in the century. He introduced to the English-speaking world several important grammatical developments, such as the role that the papyri discovered in Egypt might have in understanding linguistic phenomena in the New Testament, and the category of 'kind of action' (*Aktionsart*) over 'time of action' in discussing the Greek verb. Moulton finished his *Prolegomena* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906; 3rd edn, 1908), but W.F. Howard was enlisted after Moulton's untimely death to finish the second volume, *Accidence and Word-Formation, with an Appendix on Semitisms in the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1929). Whereas Moulton was quite progressive in his approach, the remaining volumes of the grammar were completed by N. Turner, who had a different approach, treating the Greek of the New Testament as a form of Semitized Greek: *Syntax* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963) and *Style* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976). The largest

Greek grammar, and similar to the perspective of Moulton, is that of A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 4th edn, 1934). Although in the course of exegesis one should consult these grammars, one must also be aware that the linguistic perspective represented is now seriously outmoded in light of recent developments in Greek grammar and linguistics. Many areas have benefited from this recent research, such as study of verb tense and mood, phrase structure, and the case system, to name only a few.

There have been a number of intermediate level and handbook-style grammars that have appeared on the market as well. These are designed not only for instructional purposes but for providing a quick survey of a given topic. Three of the earlier grammars are H.E. Dana and J.R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1927), which is patterned after Robertson's grammar, C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957; 2nd edn, 1959), and M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples* (trans. J. Smith; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963). Of the three, Moule's provides the discussion of the most examples and often illustrates their exegetical significance, while Zerwick has the most informed linguistic perspective, and is particularly insightful in his discussion of the Greek verb. More recent works of this sort include J.A. Brooks and C.L. Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1979), R.A. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: Broadman, 1994), S.E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Biblical Languages: Greek, 2; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992; 2nd edn, 1994), and D.B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). Brooks and Winbery adopt a very traditional approach, with endorsement of a form of sentence diagramming, while Wallace almost shuns advances in modern linguistics. Porter and Young integrate insights from recent linguistic research into their approach, such as on Greek verb structure and discourse analysis.

Experienced exegetes may be aware of many of the Greek grammars mentioned above but may still be unaware of the many important monographs that address specific topics in the study of the Greek of the New Testament. In the same way that thorough exegesis of matters of context requires consultation with specialist

monographs, so does Greek language research require study of monographs on pertinent topics, not simply reference to standard grammars. Still important and not yet surpassed is M.E. Thrall's *Greek Particles in the New Testament: Linguistic and Exegetical Studies* (NTTS, 3; Leiden: Brill, 1962), although it reflects a classical-philology approach. N. Turner's *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1965) offers occasional exegetically stimulating perspectives on difficult passages. Discussion of select exegetically-significant passages is found in S.E. Porter, *Studies in the Greek New Testament: Theory and Practice* (SBG, 5; New York: Lang, 1996). The influence of the modern linguist Noam Chomsky can be seen in the work of D.D. Schmidt, *Hellenistic Greek Grammar and Noam Chomsky: Nominalizing Transformations* (SBLDS, 62; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981), and M. Palmer, *Levels of Constituent Structure in New Testament Greek* (SBG, 4; New York: Lang, 1995). There are other monographs of importance, but these reflect some of the most important that should be consulted in the course of exegesis.

The area where there has been more work than any other, however, is in the study of the Greek verb (see the Chapter on the Greek Language for further discussion). An early study that still has merit is that of E.D.W. Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3rd edn, 1900). His discussion includes many useful insights into Greek verb structure, although it is written outside of the parameters of modern linguistic study. More recently, there have been several monographs that have addressed the question of the relation of Greek verbs to time and to the kind of action they describe. The first monograph in English on this topic was by S.E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood* (SBG, 1; New York: Lang, 1989), followed soon after by B.M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (OTM; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), and then by K.L. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek: An Aspectual Approach* (SBG, 5; New York: Lang, 1993). Although each of these monographs concludes slightly differently regarding the question of how the verbs function in Greek, they are all agreed that the category of verbal aspect is important and needs to be studied further. Verbal aspect is concerned with depicting events as they appear to the language user, rather than relating them to some objective kind of action (or time). A summary of this discussion

is found in S.E. Porter and D.A. Carson (eds.), *Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research* (JSNTSup, 80; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 18-82. These sources should be consulted, along with the standard reference grammars, when discussing linguistic issues in exegesis of the Greek text.

A further important area of investigation is the area of semantics, or meaning as mediated through language. This is a multi-faceted area that can be extended to include almost every dimension of language use, but is often constricted to the area of lexicography, including dictionary making. J.P. Louw has written a useful introduction to the wider topic of meaning in language, *Semantics of New Testament Greek* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Chico: Scholars Press, 1982). Traditional lexicography has often been concerned to provide translational equivalents or glosses for the words of Greek, arranged in alphabetical order. The most widely-used of these lexicons is W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (trans. and rev. W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, and F.W. Danker; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, rev. edn, 1979). This lexicon has many inconsistencies, many of them forced on it by traditional lexicography, including the failure to relate words to each other, but it is full of useful references to extra-biblical Greek examples for comparison. On a smaller scale, with clear reference to the Septuagint, is G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 3rd edn, 1937). Less useful because it pre-dates appropriation of insights from the Greek papyri, but still cited, is J.H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1886). Still of great value because of the evidence from the papyri that is brought to bear on understanding the vocabulary of the New Testament is J.H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1929). This reference volume makes it clear that understanding of the Greek of the New Testament is enhanced when it is considered within the wider framework of Greek usage of the time.

New Testament lexicography took a sizable step forward, however, with publication of a new form of lexicon based upon semantic fields or domains: J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida (eds.), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains* (2 vols.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1988). Realizing that words are not learned, retained or used in alphabetical order, but rather in relation to

other words of related meaning in the language, this lexicon categorizes words according to approximately forty different areas of meaning. One can now see how individual words relate to other words within the same sphere of meaning. In response to criticism (much of it unmerited), the principles of this lexicon are more fully discussed in E.A. Nida and J.P. Louw, *Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament* (SBLRBS, 25; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992). A basic introduction to the larger topic of semantics is M. Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, rev. edn, 1994). This work relies heavily upon much of the standard theory in lexical semantics in linguistic circles, and is useful for study of the New Testament as well as the Septuagint.

Theological lexicography is a topic that is sometimes introduced into exegesis of the New Testament. Arising out of the Biblical Theology movement earlier in this century, most theological lexicography attempts to link theological concepts with individual words in the language, with the unfortunate result that, often, particular words are said to have special theological meaning in and of themselves and in virtually all contexts. The most widely promoted form of theological lexicography was found in G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 vols.; trans. G.W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76). Apart from providing important lists of extra-biblical references, this source should be avoided for discussion of meaning, in particular in the earlier volumes. Somewhat similar is H. Balz and G. Schneider (eds.), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990-93). C. Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (3 vols.; trans. J.D. Ernest; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), concentrates on New Testament usage, with valuable extra-biblical references. Probably best of this kind of resource is C. Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Exeter: Paternoster, 1975-79), because it is categorized by English concepts, and hence includes a number of Greek words under one general heading. The nadir of this method was perhaps reached in N. Turner, *Christian Words* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980), where he tried to argue on often thin evidence that there was a sizable category of distinctly Christian words. This entire approach has been soundly and rightly criticized by a number of scholars, including J. Barr, *The*



*Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) and A. Gibson, *Biblical Semantic Logic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979). They have shown that there are many persistent logical and linguistic flaws in trying to get meaning out of the history or supposed theological essence of a word, or in trying to transfer one theological meaning to all uses of a word. These critical sources, especially the first, are often cited, but it is still surprising how many such abuses of exegetical method still persist.

#### 4. CONTEXT AND INTERPRETATION

The study of context includes both immediate and remote context, as well as the history of antecedent and ongoing interpretation. Context is an especially difficult concept to define, since it can include such minute structures as a particular place in a letter and such expansive issues as an entire cultural background. In any event, context constitutes one of the major pillars of exegesis. Many of the following chapters in this volume provide useful guides to the topics involved in the study of context, and provide indications of bibliographic resources available in these areas. In this bibliographical essay, several more general sources are discussed. These include volumes that discuss the history of biblical interpretation, and introductions to the New Testament.

##### A. History of Interpretation

The history of New Testament interpretation is often neglected in exegesis, especially much exegesis that purports to return to the original languages and the original text. There is a persistent (mistaken) belief in some circles that one can return to the original text, unaffected by all previous interpretation, and without the influence of modern interpretative constructs. One small example illustrates how fallacious such thinking can be. Much of twentieth-century Pauline interpretation is still conducted as a reaction to the radical re-assessment of the history of the early Church proposed by F.C. Baur. Even those who know something of the history of recent interpretation, however, often overlook earlier periods of thought, such as medieval exegesis.

The most useful guide to recent interpretation is by E.J. Epp and G. MacRae (eds.), *The New Testament and its Modern Interpreters* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989). For the most part, they provide excellent surveys of a host of areas of interpretation in contemporary

New Testament study, along with useful and often extensive bibliographies. There are also a number of earlier works that deal with the history of interpretation. They obviously do not deal with very recent developments, but they are often useful guides to the kinds of questions that were being asked in previous eras of interpretation. One often finds that many of the issues currently being debated have long histories of previous discussion. Some of the more valuable earlier volumes include: M. Jones, *The New Testament in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1924), who discusses the effects of higher criticism on New Testament study, and A.M. Hunter, *Interpreting the New Testament: 1900–1950* (London: SCM Press, 1951), a brief but competent study of the first half of the century, a time vital for development in New Testament studies. There are also a number of more recent treatments of similar issues. For example, W.G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems* (trans. S.McL. Gilmour and H.C. Kee; Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), offers a detailed compendium of the issues from a distinctly German perspective. His treatment is to be contrasted with that of S. Neill and T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), probably the best overview of the topic for the period discussed, although admittedly concentrating on British scholars such as Lightfoot, Westcott and Hort (who can blame them?). Also to be noted are W.G. Doty, *Contemporary New Testament Interpretation* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), who discusses more recent trends (at least for that time); R.M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; London: SPCK, 2nd edn with D. Tracy, 1984), a solid short account; B. Lindars on the New Testament in J. Rogerson, C. Rowland, and B. Lindars, *The Study and Use of the Bible* (History of Christian Theology, 2; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1988); J.C. O'Neill, *The Bible's Authority: A Portrait Gallery of Thinkers from Lessing to Bultmann* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), who selects a number of individuals for discussion; W. Baird, *History of New Testament Research. I. From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), who intriguingly surveys this important early period; and J.K. Riches, *A Century of New Testament Study* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1993), which is quite a selective account. The most up-to-date recent account of the rise of modern biblical interpretation, with discussion of several of the recent

critical approaches, such as literary criticism and social-scientific criticism, is R. Morgan with J. Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford Bible Series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Discussion of earlier biblical interpretation is found in J.L. Kugel and R.A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (LEC, 3; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), in which Greer emphasizes the development of biblical interpretation in the Church Fathers; and K. Froehlich (trans. and ed.), *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Sources of Early Christian Thought; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), a useful sourcebook of texts from the early Church.

Surveys of the history of interpretation can serve several useful purposes. For example, they can provide a way into the major intellectual movements that governed the development of various critical perspectives. Furthermore, they can push the reader to explore more detailed accounts of the period or people involved. Perhaps most importantly, however, knowledge of the history of interpretation can help exegetes to avoid making some of the same exegetical mistakes of past interpreters.

### *B. New Testament Introductions*

A final category of bibliography for discussion is the New Testament introduction. The introduction has become a genre in its own right, and one that should not be neglected in exegesis of the New Testament. A good introduction should be able to provide relevant and useful material on the context for the interpretation of a given book, besides establishing the foundation of the biblical documents themselves. It should also include pertinent and relatively current discussion of the major critical issues relevant to study of a given book, and some idea of the various critical methods available for discussion of these issues. Utilizing a New Testament introduction is, of course, not a substitute for full and complete investigation of each of the issues of introduction to be discussed for a given book of the New Testament. Nevertheless, an introduction can often provide a basic framework for understanding the kinds of issues that should be brought to bear in informed exegesis.

New Testament introductions come in a variety of sizes, shapes, lengths and amounts of detail. Reading them soon makes clear that it is difficult to be as inclusive as is needed within the confines of a single volume (or even two). The result is that authors of introductions often reveal a particular perspective. For example, some of them emphasize the Jewish origins and background to the New Testament,

while others stress the Greco-Roman context. Some focus almost exclusively upon particular issues related to the given New Testament books, while others introduce a number of important background issues, such as cultural context or canonical formation. Theological perspectives are also often revealed in these introductions, and these almost assuredly have an influence upon a number of critical issues, such as chronology and authorship. The following discussion divides them according to the amount and kind of detail that they provide.

The introductions that will probably be of the most consistent exegetical help are those that have the most detail, including reference to pertinent secondary scholarly literature. There are a number of introductions here that merit examination. H. Koester has written an *Introduction to the New Testament* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1982). The first volume is concerned with the history, culture and religion of the Hellenistic world, and provides useful background information for the interpretation of the New Testament. The second volume treats the history and literature of the New Testament, including apocryphal and pseudepigraphal works. The perspective is that of rigorous German higher criticism, and therefore it is highly predictable (and somewhat skeptical), but it is nevertheless very valuable for understanding the growth and development of the New Testament writings, especially in relation to other sacred literature of the first few centuries, according to this perspective. A far more concise but equally valuable volume is W.G. Kümmel's *Introduction to the New Testament* (trans. H.C. Kee; Nashville: Abingdon; London: SCM Press, 1975). This volume reflects a more moderate German critical perspective. For the most part, the arguments and weighing of them is very fair. From a more conservative British perspective is D. Guthrie's *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove and Leicester: InterVarsity, 3rd edn, 1970). This massive volume provides thorough discussion of the various arguments on such issues as authorship, date, opponents, etc. There are also valuable supplemental essays on such things as the Synoptic problem. Even though one can often anticipate Guthrie's conclusions, the marshaling and weighing of arguments is probably the best to be found in a New Testament introduction. None of the introductions above includes discussion of more recent critical methods.

Four other introductions may well prove useful to exegetes. L.T. Johnson has written a highly readable and independent-minded

volume, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; London: SCM Press, 1986). Johnson does not discuss all of the issues in as much detail as such a volume as Guthrie's does, but he does introduce both historical and theological issues, since he believes that a presentation of the former is inadequate without being informed by the latter. D.A. Carson, D.J. Moo and L. Morris's *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) is theologically conservative in its conclusions, but does make useful reference to much primary and secondary literature. Also to be considered is L.M. McDonald and S.E. Porter, *Early Christianity and its Sacred Literature* (Peabody: Hendrickson, forthcoming), a full introduction with reference to much contemporary discussion. B.S. Childs has written an introduction from his canonical-critical perspective in *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (London: SCM Press, 1984; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). No matter what one thinks of Childs's approach to interpretation, his bibliography and historical survey of the exegetical issues for any given book of the New Testament are worth consulting.

There are several older introductions that should be regularly consulted, because they often marshal incredible amounts of evidence and include detailed argumentation on a given topic. They also show that many of the arguments regarding various positions, such as authorship, have not progressed very far in the last century. Four older introductions are of special note. B. Weiss, *A Manual of Introduction to the New Testament* (2 vols.; trans. A.J.K. Davidson; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1887), shows an excellent grasp of the primary sources and does not hesitate to use them. T. Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament* (3 vols.; trans. J.M. Trout *et al.*; ed. M.W. Jacobus; New York: Scribners; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909), wrote a massive introduction to stand against the onslaught of F.C. Baur and his followers. G. Milligan, *The New Testament Documents: Their Origin and Early History* (London: Macmillan, 1913), was one of the first to introduce the papyrus finds from Egypt into discussion of New Testament introduction, and hence treats such topics as Greek letter form, one of the first such discussions. Lastly, J. Moffatt, *An Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 3rd edn, 1918), still provides excellent summaries of the issues, supported from early sources.

Several more modest introductions, some of them written by scholars significant for the history of exegesis, are worth consulting

on various individual points. For example, G. Bornkamm's *The New Testament: A Guide to its Writings* (trans. R.H. Fuller and I. Fuller; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973) provides a brief introduction that deals with critical methods. W.D. Davies's *Invitation to the New Testament: A Guide to its Main Witnesses* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965; repr. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), as the title implies, does not discuss the entire New Testament, but does cover a considerable important part of it. M. Dibelius, *A Fresh Approach to the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (New York: Scribners, 1936), is of interest to those who wish to trace the origins of form criticism, since he was so important in its development. E.J. Goodspeed, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), provides a volume important in the history of interpretation, especially because of his views of the formation of the Pauline letter corpus at the end of the first century. A.M. Hunter's *Introducing the New Testament* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 3rd edn, 1972), though dated now, is an excellent first volume for someone unfamiliar with what New Testament introductions are. A.F.J. Klijn, *Introduction to the New Testament* (trans. M. van der Vathorst-Smit; Leiden: Brill, 1980), provides a useful overview of the topic. H. Lietzmann, *The Beginnings of the Christian Church* (trans. B.L. Woolf; 2 vols.; Cambridge: J. Clarke, repr. edn, 1993), is a highly informative introduction by a master of the field of early Christianity. His two volumes take the reader deep into the development of the early Church and the Church Fathers. This source is often neglected, but has a solid linguistic and cultural-historical foundation. E. Lohse, *The New Testament Environment* (trans. J.E. Steely; Nashville: Abingdon; London: SCM Press, 1976), provides an excellent volume on the history and context of early Christianity, and W. Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament: An Approach to its Problems* (trans. G. Buswell; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), provides a very useful introduction to the Greco-Roman background to the New Testament. C.F.D. Moule's *The Birth of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 3rd edn, 1981; London: A. & C. Black, 3rd edn, 1982) is not a typical introduction, but weaves an intriguing and informative story of the development of the New Testament. N. Perrin, *The New Testament, An Introduction: Proclamation and Parenthesis, Myth and History* (rev. D.C. Duling; New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, rev. edn, 1982), introduced a fairly radical critical

perspective that is retained in this revised edition. A. Wikenhauser, *New Testament Introduction* (trans. J. Cunningham; New York: Herder & Herder; Edinburgh: Nelson, 1958), offers a traditional German Roman Catholic viewpoint, which is well written and sharply focused on the important issues. These very brief summaries make it clear that there are many varying perspectives available in this genre. An exegete would not necessarily want to and certainly would not need to consult all of them to have gained a sufficient grasp of the issues of context in interpretation of the New Testament.

There are also a number of volumes that have individual features that may prove useful. For example, R.F. Collins's *Introduction to the New Testament* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983) has lengthy introductions to various dimensions of critical methodology, including such things as structuralism. D. Ewert's *From Ancient Tablets to Modern Translations: A General Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) provides a lengthy discussion of modern translations. Since translations are important tools in reflecting exegetical understanding, Ewert's assessment of the principles and practices of various translations is much to be welcomed. H.C. Kee's *Understanding the New Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 5th edn, 1993) provides useful information on the social context of the beginnings of Christianity. R.P. Martin (*New Testament Foundations* [2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Exeter: Paternoster, 1975, 1978]) has written two volumes, the first on the Gospels and the second on the rest of the New Testament. There is a wealth of information on topics sometimes not discussed in New Testament introductions, geared for students. J.A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press; London: SCM Press, 1976), is highly concerned with establishing an early (pre 70 CE) date for all of the books of the New Testament, managing to raise along the way most of the important issues of New Testament introduction. C. Rowland's *Christian Origins: From Messianic Movement to Christian Religion* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) argues that Jewish life and thought, especially apocalyptic, were clearly the formative influence on early Christianity.

## 5. CONCLUSION

There are numerous other volumes that could be included in the categories above (new ones are being published all the time), as well as many further categories for potential discussion, such as

commentaries. I do not need to list them here, except to say that I do not consider them to be as fundamental to entrance into the exegetical task as have been the works above. That is, of course, not to say that they are unimportant. However, they can more easily and more appropriately be discussed at other points in this volume. This essay provides a starting point for the basic tools of exegesis. In the course of exegesis of a text, there are recurring issues that demand more thorough critical attention. The above sources provide a means of gaining access to many of the more important sources in this discussion. The rest of this volume provides further, more detailed discussion at a number of crucial points, with reference to further bibliography.