

## Tips on exegesis

Exegesis (and exegesis papers) are activities in which practically anyone can engage. The more you practice doing it, the better you become at it. Exegesis requires two essential parts: careful reading of the biblical texts, and making an argument about those texts as well as possible. One of these parts without the other does not result in a good exegesis paper.

1. Begin with the biblical text and determine the focus of your work. If you are assigned options for your paper, such as several books, or a range of chapters, read through that material to select a pericope (short section of the text) as your focus. There are many ways to make a selection, including
  - a. What seems to “jump off the page” to you? Ask yourself, why?
  - b. What triggers you to think about another topic or text in the Bible? Again, start by asking why?
  - c. Where does the pericope begin and end? Why?
  - d. After reading the biblical text(s), read some other authors on those texts to see what they think about them. Commentaries are one such option, but articles and monographs also are options. Do you agree or disagree with them? Why or why not?
  - e. Perhaps something you are reading in another course or from another context is on your mind as you read the biblical text, and helps you think in a different way about it. Why?

The goal is to form an opinion or argument that you can develop and explain about the pericope.

2. Work with your pericope in order to develop your ideas about it. Re-read it in order to:
  - a. Note ideas, words, or themes that stand out to you.
  - b. Note questions that arise for you as you read it, such as historical questions or other questions of interpretation.
  - c. Question what seems “obvious.” Don’t take things for granted. If the text, for example, makes a reference to the assembly of Israel, ask yourself what is meant by the “assembly”? How does this writer understand the make-up of “Israel”? Is the “assembly of Israel” different from other ways of describing Israel?
  - d. Focus your reading in secondary literature. Read more about the background of the pericope and the larger biblical book in terms of: history, sociology, comparing practices with other cultures, etc.
  - e. Make use of the variety of different methods and theoretical approaches used in biblical studies and related disciplines to further your thinking. These methods and approaches can help raise questions and think through aspects of the texts.

The goal is to determine if your ideas and opinion can be formed into an argument. If not, then keep working until they can.

3. Formulate your thesis or claim about the text. Do so in one or two sentences. Note the following:
  - a. A thesis or claim is something about which you can “argue,” “analyze,” “claim,” “hypothesize.” If you “seek to,” “explore,” “consider,” “review,” “consider,”

- “discus,” or “describe,” you don’t have a clear thesis. Go back to step 2 to do more work on your ideas.
- b. Make sure you are not merely summarizing or paraphrasing the pericope. Make a claim for the text, such as how to understand the text differently in light of new information, from a new perspective, with a new methodological or theoretical lens, and so on.
  - c. Some traditional methods in biblical studies, such as form criticism, can help you articulate your thesis or claim.
4. Make a rough outline of your argument, so you know how the case you make will develop in the paper. This is another stage at which some methods can help you organize your argument.
  5. Plug your evidence into your outline. Rearrange points in your argument as necessary. Make sure you have a logical progression from one point to the next.
  6. Review steps 3–5 to determine if
    - a. Your thesis fits the topic and assignment;
    - b. Your thesis really is what you want to argue;
    - c. Your outline is clear and logical, progressing from one point to the next;
    - d. All your points are necessary and relevant to your argument;
    - e. You have enough evidence to demonstrate your thesis;
    - f. Your outline leads to your conclusion;
    - g. Your conclusion agrees with your thesis.
  7. Start writing your paper. Once you complete a draft, place it in the oven at 350 degrees for 30 minutes to bake and allow your thoughts to blend together.
  8. Read your rough draft out loud. Does it “sound” right? Are any sentences too long? Too short? Is the grammar correct? Does the argument progress in the way you expected it to? Are transitions in place between points? Do they make sense?
  9. Read the paper with your outline next to it. Have you made all the points you planned to make? Do they work in the order you laid out?
  10. Read the paper again, checking the grammar, spelling, logic, and flow of:
    - a. Each sentence;
    - b. Each paragraph; ask yourself if each paragraph has its own thesis and argument;
    - c. Each page;
    - d. The paper as a whole.
  11. Before submitting your paper, make sure it conforms to the proper style: double-spaced, footnotes (or endnotes), bibliography (if required), title page, margins, uniform fonts, etc.