Doing Biblical Exegesis by Distance Well

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Abstract

This article suggests how theological educators may improve student learning in the area of biblical exegesis in on-line mode. It suggests a way forward would be to encourage student-to-student interaction on the biblical text itself, utilising exegetical worksheets to focus the discussion, while at the same time providing students with sample exegesis material. In that way the educator would be modelling what is expected. Assessment, too, should be focused on the real-world uses of biblical exegesis.

Introduction

This article aims to contribute to the conversation regarding student biblical exegesis by distance well. Subsumed within this discussion is the wider question of the pedagogy (using the word in its widest sense to also encompass adult learners) of biblical exegesis. That is, how one teaches exegesis *in general* will indubitably affect the way we go about teaching exegesis on-line.

There are two reasons why I believe this conversation to be a vital one. First, in this age the ability to interpret the Bible accurately is a critical skill, an essential component of Christian discipleship. Unfortunately, the church does not generally promulgate appropriate techniques of biblical exegesis in a formalized way. A typical Sunday sermon might demonstrate only a very narrow range of biblical approaches. For example, Bible verses may be cited with little reference to their literary context; Bible passages may be discussed without much reference to the original historical-cultural context; and so on. Yet Christian disciples need to be thoroughly equipped for every good work and the Bible is a crucial component in this endeavour (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Consequently, I would argue that teaching techniques of biblical exegesis are an issue of pastoral care.

The second reason is that theological education is increasingly being done in online mode. As such, it is becoming more likely that a theological student will encounter biblical exegesis in an online course rather than an on-campus course. This puts a great deal of pressure on faculty to teach exegetical methods effectively in online mode. Theological institutions therefore have an obligation to do all they

can to improve the pedagogy of biblical exegesis by distance for the sake of their students' spiritual formation and ongoing discipleship.

Current Methods of Teaching Exegesis

Let me start by defining what I mean by biblical exegesis. The online Review of Biblical Literature (RBL) is the SBL's forum for reviewing monographic works of biblical scholarship. The RBL database employs a categorization system for each volume it reviews, capturing the range of methods currently employed among biblical scholars.

The different approaches are:

1. Historical approaches that "seek to understand the Bible (1) within the circumstances of its production and (2) in its evolution as a text or collection of texts. Historical approaches thus take scholarship on ancient cultures and religions, archaeology, and philology as their disciplinary conversation partners." (Cornell & LeMon 2016, 119)

2. Literary approaches that "seek to understand the Bible primarily as a work of literature by studying its rhetoric, structure, plot, characterization, narration, voice, style, and so forth. Literary approaches thus take scholarship on narratology, literary criticism, and comparative literature as primary conversation partners." (Cornell & LeMon 2016, 119) This would include, for example, narrative criticism, rhetorical criticism, and even postmodern literary criticism.

3. Social-scientific approaches that "seek to understand the Bible as an artifact of or a testimony to social dynamics in the ancient world. Such approaches take sociology, economics, anthropology, political science, and psychology as their disciplinary conversation partners." (Cornell & LeMon 2016, 119)[1]

4. Ideological critiques that "seek to understand the Bible as constructed from and also serving to construct various relations of power… These approaches often highlight the positionality of the Bible's authors as well as its contemporary interpreters. Ideological approaches take Marxist, liberationist, feminist, womanist, mujerista, black, postcolonial, and postmodern scholarship as disciplinary conversation partners." (Cornell & LeMon 2016, 120)

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[1] As an example, see William R. Herzog II (1994), *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press. I provide a critique of this approach in Chenoweth, Ben (2008) "The Vulnerability of the Literalist: A Critique of William R. Herzog II's Interpretation of the Parable of the Talents", *Pacifica* 21, 175-191.

5. Theological approaches that "seek to understand the Bible within the framework of Christian theology/ies. As such, these approaches have been considered a sub-set of ideological criticism. Like ideological criticism, theological approaches emphasize the role of the reading community… Theological approaches specifically enunciate a community's interpretation of the Bible as Scripture… By taking systematic and practical theology as disciplinary conversation partners, theological approaches connect the Bible with Christian theological concepts and churchly concerns." (Cornell & LeMon 2016, 120-121)

6. Linguistic approaches that seek to view the Bible from the perspective of linguistic concerns. I would contend that this category overlaps somewhat with some of the other approaches: historical linguistics overlaps with historical approaches; discourse analysis overlaps with literary approaches; socio-linguistics overlaps with social-scientific approaches; and so on.

Of these six approaches, the tendency in most biblical exegesis classes is to privilege the historical approach. For example, in *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal*, Martin talks about

> the primary meaning of the text to be what its meaning would have been in its original context… either the intentions of the author or the meaning understood by the ancient audience… [which] must be anchored in the social and cultural realities of the ancient context of the text's production and reception. (Martin 2008, 3-4)

While we might want to tweak Martin's definition of historical criticism his point must not be lost:

> We (and here "we" means the academy, church, and the public square) have, intentionally or unintentionally, equated historical criticism with meaning, which we have equated with reality, normativity, and truth. (Hunt et al 2009, 163)

But, as Martin says, "historical criticism does not simply give us the meaning of the text. It gives us the meaning constructed by historians who have been trained in the twentieth century." (Hunt et al 2009, 177)

However, as Wafawanaka notes,

> The decision to begin with historical methods is deliberate… [A]lthough this method has been de-centered and supplemented by other methodological approaches in the academy to reflect the current nature of global hermeneutics, I view it as foundational. It is a stepping-stone to other ways of reading… I

constantly remind my students that the mastery of historical methods is a gateway to seeing the polyvalence of the text. Thus, literary and existential approaches are presented to supplement the shortcomings of the historical-critical method as well as to de-center its hegemonic tendencies. (Mbuvi and Ashmore et al 2014, 147-8)

Consequently, when it comes to online exegesis we will need to start with the historical approach. However, we should not stop there. Martin, himself, summarises his book as follows: "there's just too much historical criticism in theological education and not enough of everything else; there's not enough critical thinking about interpretation theory; and there's not enough education in how to think theologically" (Hunt et al 2009, 169). Taking this critique on board will require us to adjust the weighting given to historical approaches to the text and incorporating critical thinking, such that students are led into having a dialogue with the biblical text.

The Scope of a Biblical Exegetical Course

The sort of course I want to particularly focus on is one that deals with one specific biblical book. The exegesis that is done in a course of this nature will involve a number of the above approaches, some more so than others. It will certainly involve historical content, possibly involving relevant material from the social-sciences, linguistic content, potentially involving significant discussion of the original language, and literary content, such as rhetorical strategies employed in the passage. I also presume that application of the biblical text to the student will be an important part, which may involve theological content and/or ideological critique.

How is all this content to be presented to the distance student? In preparing for this presentation I did a search of the literature for articles or studies in the area of teaching exegesis in distance mode. Surprisingly, Very little existed. In fact, I found very little about teaching exegesis *full stop*. Consequently, what follows is mostly based on my own experience as the Educational Designer / eLearning coordinator at one institution, which is part of the Australian College of Theology consortium.[2]

I came up with the following ways of teaching exegesis in distance mode. The first way is in written form. But presenting exegesis in this way runs the risk of coming across like a commentary. Also, it can be hard for students to digest what is important. Essentially, the lecturer does all the exegesis for them and just presents them with the end result of any exegetical decisions they made. A couple of

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[2] In this consortium the exegesis courses I am talking about occur during the second and subsequent years of a Bachelor or Graduate Diploma of Theology. Exegesis is either of the English text or the original language. Occasionally, two smaller books (such as James and 1 Peter) may be dealt with as part of one course. A specific selection of chapters is also set by the consortium; students are expected to know how to exegete those chapters by the end of the course.

years ago, I started work on a distance course for the book of Romans. Given that I had no materials to work from – I had not previously taught the course on-campus – I started preparing my own exegesis notes directly in the LMS. But the resulting lessons consisted solely of text, which did nothing to encourage student engagement. After preparing a couple of lessons like this I decided I was definitely on the wrong track.

Instead of text, one could use audio or video. There are a couple of ways of doing this. Firstly, you could record an on-campus exegesis class. After all, the lecturer has to present the material on-campus; why not kill two birds with one stone? But there are (at least) two problems with this. The lecture has been prepared for the *on-campus context*, not the online context; and the pedagogical challenges are different between the two. But the main problem is that the distance students cannot interact with the lecturer or the other students, so they will feel they truly are at a distance from the lecturer and any on-campus interaction.

The alternative is to prepare audio or video specially for distance students. But because the potential for any interaction is still missing, the end result will most likely be functionally equivalent to the first option – that is, the student ends up having to work their way through commentary material in the form of audio or video rather than text.

Finally, you could bring distance students *into* the on-campus class through video conferencing software, such as BigBlueButton. But as opposed to the previous asynchronous approaches, this is *synchronous* meaning that your distance students must be online at a certain time, regardless of their time zone and personal schedule. Also, depending on the quality of the technology, interaction with distance students may still be difficult.

Before I get to my proposal, we need to briefly outline the *objectives* of teaching an exegetical course. To my mind there are two aims:

1. We want to teach students *how* to do exegesis; that is, *method*. As the saying goes, 'give a person a fish and they eat for a day; teach that person to fish and they will eat for a lifetime.' By teaching students how to do exegesis, we are of course preparing them for ministry contexts in which exegesis is required, namely, sermon preparation, small-group Bible study preparation, and so on. However, knowing how to do exegesis will also greatly benefit the student's own personal Bible study.

2. We also want to *do* exegesis in order to learn what the biblical text under consideration means (*content*) and to see how the text can be applied to the life of the student (*application*) – which will hopefully lead to spiritual formation, surely the ultimate goal of theological education.

A Proposal

So how can we achieve these aims without the material devolving into an unengaging and potentially lengthy commentary? This quotation from Troftgruben points to the way forward:

> Formative learning often stems from direct engagement with primary data and sources – in my case, scriptural texts – and drawing conclusions regarding their significance. I have also seen the tremendous influence a learning community can have on one's formation, both in physical and virtual classrooms. No learner is an island. Human beings inevitably learn in relationship to other learners, instructors, educational associations, and contextual communities. Finally, I have also observed – especially in teaching online – that formative learning depends less on an instructor's presentations and more on her ability to evoke learner initiative and interest. (Troftgruben 2018, 34)

Troftgruben therefore advocates a 'decentred' approach. Or to use buzz-phrases, the preferred pedagogical technique is not 'sage on the stage' but 'guide from the side':

> For most biblical studies courses, reading, understanding, and interpreting ancient texts are fundamentals – are, in fact, primary learning goals. In this setting, then, a decentered approach of active learning puts the emphasis squarely where it needs to be: the careful reading of texts in ways that honor the community of learners, the process of inquiry, and the integrity of the texts themselves. (Troftgruben 2018, 35)

Then, Troftgruben goes on to say that a decentred approach

> works very well for biblical studies courses that prioritize interpreting texts. It does not invest energy into transferring information but into supplying informed interpretive tools, evoking questions and insights, and fostering a collegial atmosphere of interpretive inquiry. The approach focuses primarily on hermeneutical methods, so that learners work at becoming self-initiating readers capable of seeking out answers to their own questions. (Troftgruben 2018, 35-36)

Given that student learning is enhanced through interaction, my proposal for teaching biblical exegesis in distance mode is as follows:

1. Because exegesis is usually taught within a course focused on a specific biblical book, the themes of the book that arise in the set chapters should certainly be covered

(*content*). However, given the emphasis of this article is on exegesis, I will not say any more about this.

2. At the beginning of the course, provide students with an overview of the historical approach (*method*). This will benefit big-picture (holistic) learners who are encountering this method for the first time; but it will also serve as a helpful reminder for those students who have previously completed an exegesis course.

3. Provide commentary-like material (either in written form or audio or video recorded specifically for distance students) for *a subset* of the chapters of the week, thereby modelling what the end product of exegesis looks like (*content*).[3]

4. Get students to do some of their own research and thinking by answering specific questions on the text that have been selected by the lecturer (*method* & *content*). These questions should focus on particular exegetical issues of note that occur in the week's chapters. For example, in some of our exegesis courses, the lecturer prepares exegetical worksheets for each biblical chapter. Here is one for James 1, for students doing the exegesis in English:

   James 1 – Exegetical Worksheet (English)

   1:2-4 – Joy in Trials
   What other NT passages do these verses have affinity with?
   1:4 What do you think James means by "perfection"?

   1:5-8 – Wisdom and Faith
   1:5 Check three English versions for the translation of μη ὀνειδιζοντος in this verse.
   What is the likely sense of the expression?

   1:9-11 – The Folly of Riches
   Where else does James deal with this theme?
   1:10 Is the rich person a Christian or not? Discuss.

   1:12-16 – Enduring Temptation
   1:11 What is the source of the flower imagery here?
   What other image issues to the same effect in 4:14?

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[3] Note that I said, "recorded specifically for distance students". In my opinion, you cannot just record on-campus classes and then use that as the *primary* source of content for your distance students. It is suitable as a *secondary* resource, however.

1:12 Should πειρασμος be understood as "trial" (i.e. external), or "temptation" (i.e. internal) in this section? Why?

1:13 What does the expression ὁ γαρ θεος ἀπειραστος ἐστιν κακων (literally "God is not tempted of evil") mean?

1:19-21 – Gentleness and Meekness

1:19 Where else in James is the issue of the tongue addressed? Anger?

1:21 What is a logical consequence of the word being "implanted"?

What is significant about this for the discussion of faith and works that follows?

1:22-25 – Be Doers of the Word

1:22 What is the significance of the word "only" in this verse

1:26 What is the imagery behind the idea of "bridling the tongue"?

There is a different one for students doing the exegesis in Greek:

James 1 – Exegetical Worksheet (Greek)

1:2-4 – Joy in Trials

What other NT passages do these verses have affinity with?

1:3 How would you classify the participle γινωσκοντες?

1:4 What do you think James means by "perfection"?

1:5-8 – Wisdom and Faith

1:5 How should we translate μη ὀνειδιζοντος in this verse?

1:9-11 – The Folly of Riches

Where else does James deal with this theme?

1:9 What does ταπεινος normally mean and what is its sense here?

1:10 Is ὁ πλουσιος a Christian or not? Discuss.

1:12-16 – Enduring Temptation

1:12 Should πειρασμος be understood as "trial" (i.e. external), or "temptation" (i.e. internal) in this section? Why?

1:13 What does the expression ὁ γαρ θεος ἀπειραστος ἐστιν κακων mean, and how is the genitive to be taken?

1:14 Discuss the metaphor employed by using the participles ἐξελκομενος και δελεαζομενος, and how these are to be classified?

1:19-21 – Gentleness and Meekness

1:19 Where else in James is the issue of the tongue addressed? Anger?

1:20 There is a problem interpreting δικαιοσυνη θεου revolving mainly on how we take the genitive. Give options and their relevant meaning.

1:21 What is a logical consequence of the word being "implanted"?

1:22-25 – Be Doers of the Word

1:22 Discuss the significance of μονον.[4]

You will notice there is a fair amount of overlap, but obviously the students doing exegesis of the Greek text need to grapple more with original language-specific questions. In either case, students are encouraged to consult commentaries as they prepare answers to these questions.

5. Finally, facilitate some form of student-to-student interaction for example, a forum or a BigBlueButton session, in which the students can share what they have learned regarding method, content, application, and spiritual formation. At our institution, these discussions naturally revolve around the exegetical worksheets. But anything that comes out of the week's chapters can be discussed, including thematic material, and especially those parts of the text over which commentators disagree. After all, nothing gets a discussion going more than a difference of opinion!

This final step is essential. Student-to-student interaction becomes the central locus of learning. As such, the teacher needs to be very well trained in how to manage online discussions of this nature. To start with, the teacher's role is not the same as in the traditionally defined classroom. As Delamarter puts it,

> The online discussion is like a dance. The teacher must be careful not to impede the process. Many discover that the moment the professor steps into the discussion and starts pontificating, the students step back and conform to a more traditional and passive teaching-learning process: the discussion environment in which constructive learning takes place disappears. One might think that this is just a convenient way to avoid having to read all those student posts, but in fact it is still important for the professor to be present in the discussion, to read all the posts – but to make only very few comments, at opportune moments. (Delamarter et al 2011, 259)

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[4] These exegetical worksheets were written by Dr. Greg Forbes, head of Biblical Studies at Melbourne School of Theology, and were used with his permission.

Troftgruben makes the same point:

> In a decentered model… the instructor plays a delicate role: to correct or redirect unproductive and erroneous trajectories, to prod and provoke engagement and leadership (as needed), and to inform and encourage genuine questions. Since the voices of perceived 'experts' possess unique authority, an instructor does well to 'speak' only as much as is helpful. In doing so, the instructor undoubtedly relinquishes some measure of control – a risky endeavor, by any estimation. But this relinquishment allows for learners to engage more readily by their own initiative, albeit trial and error. (Troftgruben 2018, 37)

Interestingly, Troftgruben goes on to note that his weekly online forums are actually facilitated by a student leader.[5] However, Troftgruben's personal experience of the resulting student-to-student interaction is very encouraging:

> Their reciprocal dialogue and the text at hand became the primary sources of instruction. Learners are charged with interpreting primary sources for themselves, in ways that more readily welcome readings contextual to their respective communities. This kind of collegial dialogue does not so much inform as it forms learners to the value and importance of communal interpretation. (Troftgruben 2018, 37)

In large courses, in particular, consistent small groups of students meeting virtually at regular intervals throughout the semester will provide an ideal interactive and engaging learning environment: a consistency in membership leads to a stronger sense of connection, which in turn will lead to increased levels of sharing and vulnerability.

It should also be noted, however, that a heavy reliance on forums can lead to reading fatigue. Thus, instead of requiring text-only forums, audio and video modes of engagement could be utilised as well. For example, instead of getting students to write about themselves in an introductory forum, you could ask students to record a video of themselves, upload it to a video hosting site like YouTube or Vimeo (using suitably private settings) and then embed the video in a forum post. These videos do not need to be professionally made; students can simply use their phone or a webcam. But by doing so, students can put faces and indeed personalities to the names of their fellow distance students. This

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[5] "Each [forum] features a question posed by the instructor (myself), and a student leader charged with addressing the question first and facilitating the week's ensuing conversation. When a student leads and facilitates well, I have little to add. But when a student leads off with limited substance, sketchy ideas, or bad assumptions, I intervene promptly to redirect things without necessarily deleting them (unless they are offensive). Most often, my intervention effectively alerts the class to probe deeper and to reflect further for their own conclusions" (Troftgruben 2018, 37).

should help to deepen the interaction in later text-only forums. Of course, if asynchronicity is not a necessary requirement then video conferencing becomes possible.[6]

Assessment Considerations

Finally, we need to give students the opportunity to put the exegetical method into practice. This can be done in a number of ways. The traditional way is, of course, the exegetical essay. However, given that we are focusing on distance students, it is always better to ground assessment in a student's local ministry context. I would therefore recommend getting students to prepare a sermon or a Bible study. The student could even submit a video of them actually *giving* the sermon or taking the Bible study, as well as the text of their sermon or Bible study. It is not uncommon for on-campus students to present an oral report to the class; the same thing can be achieved for a distance class using video and a video hosting site.

I am also an advocate for the use of creative writing in theological education. While it might be challenging to incorporate exegesis into fiction, it can certainly be done. I personally have written three historical novels that also incorporate various levels of exegesis, literary structure discussions, and thematic material. While I would not expect students to write an entire novel as part of the assessment for a biblical exegesis course, we can certainly ask students to write a short story that incorporates the results of their exegetical findings.[7]

Other creative options can be provided for students. Mbuvi and James refer to "enactment or performance art, storytelling, and group projects that foster community learning. These performances might be graded alongside the accompanying exegesis essay, reducing the weight of the grade for the writing assignment." (Mbuvi and Ashmore et al 2014, 144) Another teacher has reported encouraging results from setting a group exegesis task using a wiki (Delamarter et al 2011, 264-266). There may well be other possibilities.

Conclusion

The aim of continuing this important and somewhat neglected conversation is to bring about an improvement in exegesis materials for distance students. The institution of which I am a part has come up with the concept of exegetical worksheets that can then be discussed by groups of students

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[6] Troftgruben discusses the use of video conferencing: "Scheduling typically determines the small group arrangements, but I prefer no more than eight participants per group for ease of conversation. The conversations take 30–40 minutes and are required for all learners. They entail little to no instructor presentation, focusing instead on reading a scripture text, generating collaborative questions and discussion, and drawing informed interpretive conclusions. These connection conversations are often a challenge to schedule, but they routinely make a demonstrative impact on learner engagement, which spikes immediately afterward. They also constitute the most oft-named highlight in the course for many distance learners." (Troftgruben 2018, 39)

[7] If that sounds intriguing but you are unsure what it might look like in practice, please refer to Chenoweth 2018. My historical novels, published in Australia by MST Press, are as follows: *The Ephesus Scroll* (2012) dealing with the book of Revelation, *The Corinth Letters* (2015) dealing with 1 and 2 Corinthians, and *The Rome Gospel* (2017), dealing with the gospel of Mark with excerpts of the book of Acts.

in an online forum. It would be my plea that we distance educators may keep this conversation going for the betterment of online student engagement worldwide!

About the Author

Ben Chenoweth was formerly the e-learning coordinator at Melbourne School of Theology and now is developing Biblical materials and formative processes at Donvale Christian College to establish student faithfulness in a post Christian intellectual context. Ben is the author of three historical novels a play on the life of King Saul and a musical and is currently pursuing a PhD in education at Deakin University, Melbourne.

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