

A Definition and Description of Exegesis

Definition

Exegesis is another term that has suffered an identity crisis in the past couple of decades. The term exegesis is derived from the Greek verb ἐξηγέομαι that basically means to “lead out” and is used for the process that “leads out the meaning of a given text.” There are several interesting uses in the New Testament that helps give the range of meaning that the term possesses. On the road to Emmaus the two men who recognized Christ later “explained the events to others (Lk 24:35). Paul and Barnabas “explained” the meaning of the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. In effect, exegesis deals with *what the text means*, or more specifically as Osborne suggests, *what the text meant*. Exegesis is interested in determining what the author meant by what he stated in the text. As Thomas points out, the meaning of exegesis in biblical circles is hard to pin down (JETS 39/2; p. 244). Most see exegesis as being synonymous with the grammatical historical approach to interpretation. Many, however, do see exegesis as also involving relevance for a contemporary audience. In this sense it is broader in meaning, begin almost synonymous with hermeneutics/interpretation (Martin, p. 220; Silva, p. 19). Kaiser states that “*exegesis* is closely related to hermeneutics” (*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, p. 44). He calls hermeneutics the “theory that guides exegesis” (p. 47).

When I “use” the term exegesis, I mean that it is the process of determining the meaning of the text as intended by the author.

Description

Exegesis is concerned with what the words meant in their historical setting. In order to accomplish this task, exegesis makes use of various disciplines. Exegesis is concerned first and foremost with the text, therefore the discipline of textual criticism is crucial to exegesis. One needs to be confident that the text before the interpreter best represents the intended meaning of the author. Furnish argues how textual criticism can “proceed apart from the other aspects of exegesis, with a fair degree of isolation from them” (p. 9). Exegesis is also interested in the literary forms of passages it seeks to exegete. This includes genre, hymn/poetry, and figures of speech. In addition, the background, cultural setting, and theological purpose of the author are all taken into consideration when exegeting the biblical text.

Furnish makes the point that exegesis is not a fixed interpretation of a passage that never again needs to be visited since it has replaced the text, but rather an ongoing process (p. 3).