

# Exegetical Paper Guide

## Writing Papers for Biblical Studies

### 2015-2016

An exegetical paper is a type of essay that seeks to interpret or explain a certain Biblical text.

There are two types of exegetical papers that students may be asked to write at Columbia but both follow the same basic procedure.

- **Inductive Exegetical Papers** follow the steps outlined below but the research section only involves asking and responding to questions by means of information that the Bible itself provides (e.g., word studies, references in other biblical books, etc.).
- **Exegetical Research Papers** follow the same steps but combine students' careful reading of the primary source (the Bible) and critical reading and referencing of secondary sources (commentaries and journal articles *about* the Bible). It is expected that these papers will use proper in text citation to identify where the insights of scholars originated and will include a properly formatted Works Cited page. See Columbia's Term Paper Guide for citation guidelines and suggestions for integrating research material into your writing.
  - A sample exegetical research paper is available in the library handouts.

## Introduction

This short section of your paper should get the reader's attention and focus the topic of your paper (e.g., "Few texts in the New Testament are as difficult to interpret as Ephesians 5:22-33."). After several sentences of introduction, one should include a purpose statement (e.g., "This paper will follow the exegetical process to determine the central message of this text for its original audience, identify several key theological themes in the text, and suggest possible applications for Christians today."). The introduction may also include a thesis statement based on the outcome of your research (e.g., "The main theme of Psalm 23 is God's presence in the midst of trying circumstances rather than..."). A thesis makes a statement that is potentially controversial (e.g., "The writer of Judges is portraying Gideon's request for a fleece sign

in negative ways and not as an example to follow”). Others could disagree with this statement so your paper will need to argue that this point is defensible.

### **Determine the Text Unit**

If you have been given a specific group of verses this step might be unnecessary, but if not, you need to determine where a given text begins and ends. Normally text units will be at least 10 or more verses but not more than 30 or 40. Try to limit your text and prove that your text is new (e.g., new theme, location, characters, etc.). You may just be studying a scene from within a larger story which is fine as long as you mention this in your paper.

### **Compare English Versions**

Read through the text in a number of good English versions. Note any significant differences between the versions and any comments in the footnotes of these versions about other possible ways of translating the text into English. Include the most important variations in your paper and explain what difference these variations could make.

### **Create a Structural Outline**

While there are several possibilities here, you should be able to outline the text based upon either content (e.g., theme 1,2, and 3) or literary structure (e.g., vision, rhetorical question, argument, result, location notice, description of speaker, reason, time notice, etc.). This outline should be at about one half to one page in length.

### **Identify the Genre of the Text**

Determine whether the text is poetry, law, historical narrative, wisdom, prophecy, apocalyptic, or epistle. Then look carefully at your specific text to see what form (or sub-genre) is represented here (e.g., lament psalm, parable, prophetic woe oracle, etc.)

### **Research the Text**

In this section, state briefly what your assumptions are about authorship and date (“This paper will assume that Paul wrote this text during his time in a Roman jail”). Are there any background questions that need to be answered? (“To understand Samson’s birth and early life, it is important to explore the Nazirite vow described in Number 6”). Are there key questions that the original audience would have been particularly concerned about? This background material should be brief—one page or less. Then work your way carefully through each section of the text explaining and clarifying any difficult words, phrases, or concepts that are not clear. If the text is making an argument, explain the

argument. If the text is a narrative, explain why the author tells the story this way. If the text is poetry, explain the structure and any poetic devices. Keep relating your findings to the big question: What is the message of the text to its readers many years ago?

### **Relate the Parts**

In a paragraph, summarize the way the text fits together. For example: “After a description of how useless wooden idols are (vv.1-4), Isaiah goes on to describe the power and awesomeness of God (vv.5-10). He concludes the text with a statement about how God will crush all these useless Assyrian gods (vv.11-13).”

### **Construct a Focus Statement**

A focus statement is a one to two sentence summary of the message of the text for those we think were the original audience. This is a high point for your paper so spend significant time thinking about this. Why is your text in the book where it is? What is the author’s main point in your text? For example in relation to Isaiah 7:1-25: “Isaiah tells King Ahaz and the people of Judah to trust only Yahweh in the midst of the threat from both Israel and Aram. All other forms of security are worthless.”

### **Explain the Theology**

What does the text seem to be teaching about the nature of God, about following God, about the way God sees humanity, or about God’s larger mission in the world? Include a number of paragraphs here with one theological insight in each paragraph. Demonstrate how this theological insight shows up in your text and how this theological insight relates to the rest of that biblical book as well as to the theology of the rest of the Bible. Is it a key theme in the rest of the book? Does the rest of the Bible affirm it strongly?

### **Apply the Text to the Present**

Often the best approach here is to look back to the theological insights noted above, and process how they could be applied at either the individual or church level today. If a key theological insight is that “Amos argues in this chapter that God is deeply concerned for social justice,” a number of paragraphs could be devoted to evaluating how committed the contemporary church is—or individual Christians are—about pursuing social justice, and suggesting ways to demonstrate more commitment.

## Works Cited

If your exegetical paper involved research beyond simply using your Bible, list all the sources that you have cited in your paper on a separate page according to the proper format noted below.

It is worth mentioning that many research sources in biblical studies have specific guidelines for Works Cited page citation (e.g. bible commentaries, bible dictionaries, and biblical studies software). Use Columbia's Term Paper Guide to see how these unique kinds of sources should be cited.

For more detail related to the exegetical process, see:

Gorman, Michael J. *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: Revised & Expanded Edition*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009. Print.

**Do you still need help? Make an appointment with the Librarian (for research and citation help) or the Academic Support Office (for writing and citation help). Both offices are located in the library.**