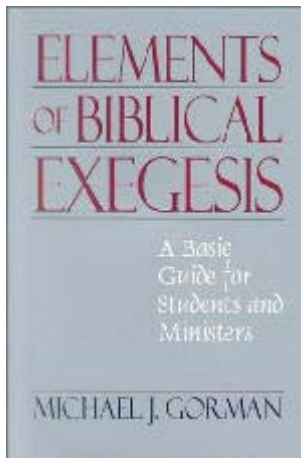


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Gorman, Michael J.

Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers

Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001. Pp. x + 239, Paperback, \$16.95, ISBN 1565634853.

William Sanger Campbell
Notre Dame College
Manchester, VT 03104

This is a revised version of the author's earlier guide, *Texts and Contexts: A Guide to Careful Thinking and Writing about the Bible*, originally published in 1990 by the Council for Religion in Independent Schools. Gorman's approach to exegesis is similar to that employed by many, if not most, exegetes, but its immediate influence appears to have been the late Princeton Theological Seminary professor of New Testament, J. Christiaan Beker. Professor Beker condensed exegetical method into four questions for his students: Where? How? What? and So what? Where does the passage being examined fall within the structure of the book or letter? How does its argument flow? What obstacles must be overcome in determining the flow of the argument? So, what is the punch line, the meaning of the text, under consideration?

Gorman has developed Beker's questions into seven elements of biblical exegesis: survey, contextual analysis, formal analysis, detailed analysis, synthesis, reflection, and expansion and refinement. The first of these, survey, provides an overview of the passage under investigation. It involves recording observations and questions as they arise in reading the text, then gathering first impressions and fashioning them into a provisional thesis about its meaning. Careful examination of the passage's historical and literary contexts is the second element in Gorman's method. Contextual analysis requires consideration of significant historical, social, and cultural circumstances in and from which the text emerged as well as attention to where it is situated within the larger composition (literary) and why (rhetorical) it appears there. The third element analyzes the passage's form, structure, and movement. What type of writing is employed, and what

literary patterns are discernible in the passage's main divisions and subdivisions as well as its progression from beginning to end?

Gorman refers to the fourth element, detailed analysis, as "the very heart of exegesis" (90) because it encompasses the "careful scrutiny of every word, phrase, allusion, grammar point, and syntactical feature in the text" (90). It is surprising, therefore, that his discussion offers no specific instructions on how to do word studies or how to use lexicons and concordances but instead focuses on the dangers of lexical analysis. Although it contains valuable information, this section exhibits a lack of balance that threatens to steer students away from important exegetical tools. Gorman does, however, helpfully review--or perhaps for some, introduce--the explicit (grammatical, chronological, and logical) and implicit (e.g., structural) relationships among various parts of a text. He also touches on important critical methods used in the overall evaluation of biblical texts, namely, source, form, tradition, redaction, and narrative criticism.

Gorman describes the fifth element, synthesizing the results of the analytical process, as "a disciplined but creative act of integration" (115-16). At this stage, the quest for the passage's main point, ongoing from the beginning of the exegetical task, becomes explicit as the exegete attempts to articulate an explanation from the data accumulated thus far. The sixth element, reflection, brings Beker's "So what?" question front and center. What is the significance of the text for readers beyond the original audience, particularly for readers today? Gorman lists five interpretive postures from which exegetes approach a biblical text to determine its broader or ongoing meaning: antipathy (opposed to the Bible or its effects as dangerous), appreciation or noncommitment (interested in the Bible's literary or historical, but not its religious, appeal), discernment or inquiry (uncommitted but open to the Bible as sacred text), suspicion (distrustful of the Bible's use to marginalize or oppress), and consent or trust (confident of encountering God's word through the Bible). One's hermeneutic determines whether and how one will appropriate the text under examination for the present. The final element is the expansion and refinement of the exegesis. Having arrived at an independent interpretation of the passage, the exegete is now prepared to engage the work of other scholars, who may confirm or correct the results thus far formulated, resolve open questions, raise significant issues not addressed, and become conversation partners whose insights may be critically evaluated against the exegete's own reading.

Throughout the book, Gorman cautions readers about potential dangers in the process that he presents in an effort to prevent the method from becoming imperious or unnecessarily repetitious and, as a result, draining the creative juices so necessary to the exegetical craft. He also offers a host of practical admonitions in his discussion of each element and, separately, in a chapter of suggestions on common mistakes. Such errors include, for example, assigning a universal meaning to a word without considering its context (for which Gorman borrows James Barr's nomenclature, illegitimate totality

transfer); assigning word meaning according to its origins, again without adequate contextual consideration (etymological fallacy); selecting texts about which the exegete is too passionate or emotional; and attempting an analysis beyond the exegete's ability or experience. He even tosses in a reminder that *exegete* is a noun, not a verb, as it is oftentimes misused.

Two important insights offered that anyone who has taught exegesis can appreciate are worth noting: secondary literature should not be consulted prior to the completion of the exegete's own analysis (essentially the first six elements), and the exegetical process is more circular than sequential. The book returns to the second of these, the so-called hermeneutical circle, sufficiently for this concept not to be overlooked. The first insight, however, is mentioned only once, and, even though its placement as the last element is suggestive (an implication offset, however, by the notion of the hermeneutical circle), it might have been made more forcefully.

Overall, Gorman has fashioned a useful guide to biblical exegesis, one that highlights practical guidelines--"devoted to the nuts and bolts of exegesis" (25)--without ignoring the theoretical underpinnings of the exegetical task. His presentation is aimed at students learning the craft of biblical analysis, pastors constantly in need of improving their exegetical skills, and teachers attempting to introduce exegetical method to their students--really anyone who practices or teaches exegesis. This is an excellent resource for undergraduate or graduate Bible courses with an exegetical component. Since the guide is directed primarily toward those working with English translations, it will not replace traditional handbooks on the exegesis of Greek and Hebrew texts. It deserves a place on the bookshelf, however, beside these and other manuals collected during one's career as an exegete, many of which Gorman lists and briefly describes in a very helpful chapter on resources (ch. 11). Gorman has achieved significantly more than his modest goal that the guide "prevent exegetical illiteracy among everyday readers, teachers, and preachers of biblical texts" (3).