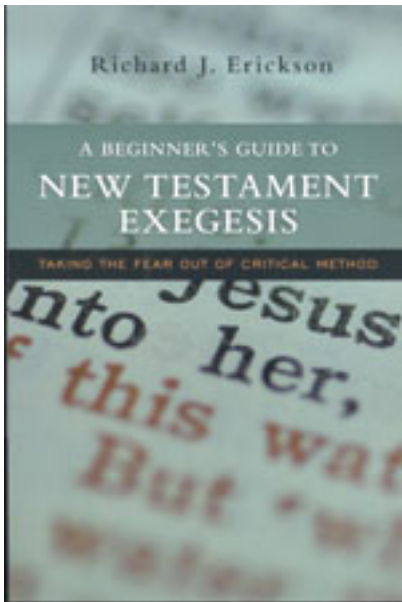


RBL 06/2006



Erickson, Richard J.

***A Beginner's Guide to New Testament Exegesis:
Taking the Fear out of the Critical Method***

Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005. Pp. 239.
Paper. \$18.00. ISBN 0830827714.

Peter Judge
Winthrop University
Rock Hill, SC 29733

Richard Erickson (Fuller Seminary Northwest, Seattle) has provided a textbook on the texts, tools, and methods of New Testament exegetical study, aimed primarily at seminary students who probably will not be practicing exegesis as a full-time occupation. Yet he gently reminds his readers again and again that what will be their full-time occupation can be more fulfilling and better rooted in Scripture if they cultivate sound habits of exegesis that can be used with realistic regularity. Realism and regularity are the two virtues promoted by this very readable handbook that take the fear out of critical biblical study for the beginning student or the busy pastor. Neither student nor pastor should be intimidated by lack of expertise or a pressing schedule to despair of doing all that *should* be done to accomplish worthwhile exegesis. Rather, one should do what one *can* do by managing the skill and time available instead of simply falling back on the commentators. Erickson is no messenger of mediocrity, however; his mantra is that regular practice bears fruit, that persistence pays off, and that the preacher must embrace the vocation of "exegete for life" (220, the last words of the book). His book congenially shows the pastoral exegete/preacher how to do so with confidence and how to find joy in the exercise.

The preface explains the genesis of the book in the classroom with beginning students of exegesis. Having used G. D. Fee's *New Testament Exegesis* for years, Erickson noticed

that the quality of Fee's handbook as a lifelong reference tool somewhat subverts its intention as an introduction. Even the fact that it includes a separate "Short Guide for Sermon Exegesis" carries the likely unintended implication that most seminary graduates "will never be able to do a proper job, now that they see all that is involved" (14). Erickson seeks to provide a more readily digestible guide for beginners (and veterans who think they have lost their time and talent for exegesis) in hopes that, having overcome the intimidation, they will graduate to Fee's guide to fine-tune their skills. Readers should also not miss mention in the preface (15) of the well-done supplemental material and exercises in PDF format provided by the InterVarsity Press website (www.ivpacademic.com) for free use by students and teachers.

The book then proceeds in ten chapters—suitable for a quarterly course or adaptable for a full semester. An opening chapter helps to set the interpretive frame of mind and reminds the student to see exegesis as the first major step toward making the biblical text relevant to modern readers. The text must be contextualized in its ancient setting. The later step, hermeneutics (not treated directly in this book), will recontextualize the text for hearers/readers in a new, contemporary setting. The two must work hand in hand. Erickson makes clear from beginning to end that he (and he assumes his audience) is committed deeply to Christian faith and that the exegesis he teaches has to do with Spirit-moved and faithful interpretation of biblical texts as the inspired Word of God. He reminds his readers in several places that they have been called by God to do this work. This is not mentioned here with negative intent, only to alert those who teach biblical studies in a more neutral setting that this may not be the textbook for them. Having noted that, one of the great strengths of this book is that Erickson also continually reminds readers that this work is done in community, not privately. He writes, "Part of the process of seeking a more accurate understanding of the written revelation of God is participating in a grand conversation with other readers" (25); again, "We work *together* in the grand project of understanding ancient texts, and this implies that we listen to each other and critically evaluate each other's opinions with care, sympathy and grace" (180). This undergirding and overriding commitment to an ecclesial view of the New Testament and its interpretation allows him to be politely critical of some myopic contemporary interpretations (especially of the book of Revelation) and teaches readers that exegesis is about trying to discover what the ancient text said to its original readers as a basis for making a connection with readers today. Done in the context of the "great conversation," faithful exegesis allows the text to say what it says, not what we want it to say.

The next four chapters discuss the tools and methods of exegesis. One of the features that makes this volume truly useful for beginners is that it can be employed before one has full facility with New Testament Greek. Erickson expects that the student will get to that point, and he regularly nudges his reader in that direction, but a student who is not yet

there can use this guide to begin some serious exegetical work in English and thus be that much more motivated to make progress in acquiring Greek. Chapter 2 provides a very clear introduction to the issues of textual criticism and establishing the text for exegesis. There is also a description of basic tools—concordances, dictionaries, atlases, synopses—and how to use them, as well as the distinction and value of primary and secondary sources. Chapter 3 deals with discerning the structure of texts—from larger to smaller units and back again—with hands-on exercises that clearly guide the student through the process (in Greek and English). Chapter 4 continues with syntactical and discourse analysis, enabling the student to practice with the English translation if necessary but with the warning: “without a working knowledge of New Testament Greek syntax we cannot hope to understand the Greek New Testament” (70). Chapter 5 involves students in confronting the “occasional” nature of the New Testament literature with a discussion of the importance of historically and culturally situating a text. Erickson’s wisdom as a teacher shows through here as he comforts the beginner that not everyone can know everything, that “it truly does take a lifetime” to be competent in history, language, and culture. At the same time, he warns of pedantry—the danger of a little knowledge about history or vocabulary being a dangerous thing—and advises that the only solution is to do the work. Good learning is crucial to good exegesis, but this wise teacher reminds his budding interpreters/preachers that “a congregation does not need—or want—to hear everything we *do* learn about a text” (94).

The ensuing four chapters show the student how to apply the general principles learned thus far to exegetical work with the various genres of New Testament literature: letters (ch. 6), narratives (ch. 7–8), and apocalypse (ch. 9). Erickson is to be complimented here on the wide variety of examples he provides for each of the genres, drawing in some way from all but five of the New Testament books. Even for the genre of apocalypse, he does not stick to the obvious book of Revelation but shows his student how to work with apocalyptic sections in both the letter and narrative literature as well. The two chapters on narratives cover, first, the wider issues of the Gospel genre (including Acts), source, form, and redaction criticism (with very helpful coaching on use of the Aland Synopsis) and, second, exegesis of various subgenres in these texts. All through these chapters Erickson is bold about his commitment to solid critical exegetical method, but at the same time he seems to be gently encouraging to students who may come from a rather conservative, even fundamentalist, background. He is not apologetic, but he senses their concerns about why reading the Bible must be so complex. Here is an exemplary reply (taken from near the end of the discussion on the interrelations of the Synoptics): “These are understandable concerns, but they come at the matter from the wrong end. *They imply that our assumptions about Holy Scripture are to be preserved in spite of what we may discover about the Scriptures from studying them as they are.* What we ought to do

instead is what we usually claim to be doing anyway: we need to allow the *actual* character of the Scriptures to define for us what our assumptions about them should be” (149, emphasis original).

A concluding chapter frames the set by recalling the interpretive context and frame of mind and by gathering together a number of very practical considerations and encouragements for the (aspiring) preacher whose exegetical work is done in the demanding and unpredictable context of pastoral ministry. The book concludes with a glossary of terms, an annotated bibliography of useful tools, and indices of subjects and Scripture quotations. The style is lively and quite readable, even entertaining, throughout, but the content is clearly the serious, thoughtful product of years of teaching with concern that students and preachers confidently embrace exegesis for life.