
Theologian Karl Barth bid a formal farewell to his students in Bonn, Germany just before being expelled from Germany in 1935 with these words: “And now the end has come. So listen to my piece of advice: exegesis, exegesis, and yet more exegesis! Keep to the word, to the Scripture that has been given to us” (Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Fortress 1976). Early Jewish rabbis offered similar counsel regarding the study of Torah:

Study it, study it—for everything is in it! Examine it diligently until you are worn out with old age by it, and do not be distracted from it; you could have no better measure than it.

*Mishnah 'Abot* 5:22

If the exegesis of Scripture is indeed the life blood of theology and ministry, then we are in constant need of able and inspiring mentors who can guide new generations of students through the thicket of translation, analysis, hermeneutics, and interpretation in close reading of the Bible. Many good introductions and guides to methods of exegeting the Old and New Testaments have been written over the centuries, each seeking to borrow and adapt the best available intellectual resources of the day to study sacred Scripture. In his new book entitled *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis*, Bill Brown has provided students with the best currently available guide to the methods of reading and interpreting the Old Testament for our time and context. His gifts as a master teacher, an engaging writer, a subtle thinker, and a generative and wide ranging interpreter of Scripture are all on prominent display in this book. I have used this book as a primary text in an introductory course on Old Testament exegesis. I can personally testify to its pedagogical effectiveness as a reliable guide to the complexities of interpreting an ancient sacred text for students beginning their lifelong learning and practice of biblical exegesis. I imagine the *Handbook* could also be helpful to pastors seeking to update their exegetical practice in light of new perspectives and methods in the study of Scripture.

Brown’s accessible and well written guide offers twenty-three chapters divided into four main parts. Part I, “Getting Started,” contains three chapters that orient the reader to the “hermeneutical adventure” involved in biblical exegesis. The chapter entitled “Self-Exegesis” introduces as a first assignment the writing of an “exegesis of the self” by responding to nine questions that probe the student’s own perspective, family, culture, religious
background and faith tradition in regard to Scripture. By sharing their exegetical self-profiles with other class members, students begin to develop a community of mutual understanding and dialogue with a deeper appreciation of their own diverse perspectives that will inevitably influence their interpretations of biblical texts.

Part II, “Analytic Approaches,” provides the core topics of what many other guides to biblical exegesis might include. Ten chapters cover translation, text-criticism, poetry, narrative, structural analysis of a text’s internal design, genre, and movement, history of composition, comparative work with other ancient Near Eastern texts, literary analysis of the text and its relationships to the larger literary contexts in which it is embedded, historical analysis, and canonical analysis of how the parts of Scripture relate to the larger whole of Scripture.

In each of these chapters, Brown begins with a clear statement of the core questions asked by a given exegetical method or reading strategy. Brown then deftly illustrates practical applications of the given method or approach, using a variety of different Old Testament texts. One of Brown’s innovations is adding to each chapter an illustration of the effect of the given exegetical method on the interpretation of the same two Old Testament texts which are considered in each of the ten chapters, namely, Genesis 1:1-2:4a and Gen 2:4b-3:24. This innovation allows students to see how the very same biblical text may yield quite different insights, depending on the specific exegetical method being used. A given method will help the student understand certain dimensions of an Old Testament text, but it will ignore others.

Before moving to Part III, Brown interjects what he calls an “Interlude” with a brief chapter entitled “From Text to Table.” The interlude signals a transition in emphasis from the previous more “analytical” chapters of methods that were more descriptive in nature and focused on the ancient biblical text itself (“in,” “around,” and “behind” the text). As far as possible, these methods aim to allow the ancient text to have its say on its own terms. In the chapters that follow, Brown turns to a broad array of diverse contemporary contexts and readerly locations that ask what the biblical text might mean for you, for the communities you inhabit, and other communities that are different from yours.

Brown uses the metaphor of the student now sitting at a table of discourse and dialogue among diverse contemporary readers and reading communities. This is the transition in the book “From Text to Table.” The student’s own exegetical self-profile from earlier in Part I now represents one of the seats at this diverse table of discourse seeking for meaning.

Part III, “Readings in Place,” includes eight chapters that discuss a wide (but not exhaustive) array of contemporary perspectives and readerly locations that may shape our approach to the biblical text: science, ecology, gender, empire,
minority communities, disability, and theology. As in the more analytic section of Part II, Brown leads the student through very concrete and specific illustrations of how a given contemporary perspective might interpret a number of specific Old Testament texts. In addition, Brown continues in each chapter with his consistent use of the same texts of Genesis 1:1-2:4a and Genesis 2:4b-3:24 to further illustrate how different angles of vision often generate different meanings from the same biblical texts.

The final section of the book—Part IV, “Communication”—consists of one brief chapter on “Retelling the Text” in the form of a Bible study or sermon. Brown’s assumption is that exegesis is not over until the student retells the ancient biblical text to an actual contemporary audience in a genre that is different from the text itself. The delivery of a sermon or the teaching of a Bible study is the culmination and ultimate telos of biblical exegesis. All of our hard-won efforts to exegete a biblical text may be diluted or lost if we do not in the end communicate the meaning of a biblical text in a compelling and faithful way to a contemporary audience. Effective communication involves exegeting yourself (Part I), exegeting the text (Parts II and III), and exegeting the audience and context you hope to address as you prepare to communicate what the text means for a real-life community today. Brown offers an illustrative sample of a sermon he delivered on Genesis 2:4b-3:24 and a Bible study he taught on Genesis 1:1-2:4a with some commentary on how his exegesis of the specific audiences for each example of retelling the text to a contemporary audience informed the shape and content of his sermon or Bible study.

Each of the twenty-three chapters ends with an up-to-date bibliography of well-chosen resources if the reader wishes to explore a topic in more depth. The book concludes with a glossary of key exegetical terms, a Scripture index, and a helpful index of subjects and names of scholars cited throughout the book.

Finally, I need to convey an overall conviction and mood that weaves its way in and through the chapters of Brown’s Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis: the gentle promotion of an underlying sense of joy, surprise and wonder as a foundation for compelling exegesis and interpretation of biblical texts. Brown’s previous scholarly work relating science and Bible uses the sense of “wonder” as a key shared connecting point. Brown sees this same sense of wonder as an essential element in performing the exegesis of Scripture in community:

The reader’s sense of wonder of the text naturally leads to wondering about the text with others. This is not to say that the text can simply be conformed to the reader’s expectations, but it does affirm that the text
can mean more than one thing when read in community. Exegesis, in short, should foster an expectancy of surprise. Broadly speaking, this handbook aims to reframe exegesis in order to facilitate more generative, if not transformative, encounters with the text and with others around the text.... Exegesis is both a tremendous responsibility and an incredible joy, a praxis most fully realized in community. Exegesis should model such open, wonder-driven inquiry as it facilitates the necessary movement from [biblical] text to table [of dialogue] (p. x).

I fully concur. In addition to joy, wonder, and imagination, of course, the complex work of exegesis also requires much hard work, critical analysis, reasoned argument accounting for as much of the details in the text as possible, and an inevitable mix of failure and success. In the preface to the third edition of The Epistle to the Romans, Karl Barth observed that “true exegesis involves, of course, much sweat and many groans.” Pastors who preach every week or teachers who lead regular Bible studies know this combination of sweat, groans and discipline mixed with joy, wonder and creativity. In the end, all good exegetes live and work out of a sense of trust that the biblical text, when exegeted well, can be depended on to yield a fruitful and timely word for a given community of faith. Brown's Handbook can help all practitioners of biblical exegesis to perform their work with more self-awareness, more attention to different methods, and more appreciation of the diversity of perspectives that may open new doors into these ancient biblical texts.

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