
Twenty-five years after its first publication (1982), Hayes and Holladay’s exegetical handbook has reached a third edition, a testament to its usefulness and broad appeal in the classroom. Theological students have been and will continue to be the primary beneficiaries of this manual, thanks to its treatment of both Old and New Testaments, its practical tone, and its clear prose, unencumbered by footnotes or endnotes. In short, Hayes and Holladay have given students an exceedingly readable introduction to the art and science of exegesis.

Though the basic format and content of the book remain relatively unchanged, the third edition has several important additions. Its two new indices (scripture citations from NRSV, pp. 231-232; and subjects and names, pp. 233-236) enhance the value of the work as a reference manual. The authors have also augmented and slightly reworked several chapters from the revised edition (1987). The most substantive changes are the addition of a chapter entitled “Exegesis with a Special Focus: Cultural, Economic, Ethnic, Gender and Sexual Perspectives” and an appendix on electronic resources for exegesis.

The success of the volume as a textbook stems from its clear structure and straightforward arguments, which I summarize here for those unfamiliar with the earlier editions. In the introductory chapter, Hayes and Holladay discuss the Bible’s antiquity, composite authorship, and authoritative status for religious communities, showing how each of these factors complicates the task of interpretation. The authors also explore the difference between eisegesis and exegesis. They establish the goal of exegesis as “reaching an informed understanding of the text” rather than “determin[ing] the meaning of the text” (p. 21, emphasis theirs)—a point reiterated throughout succeeding chapters. After orienting the reader to the academic study of the Bible, Hayes and Holladay devote the next nine chapters to discrete methods of biblical interpretation: textual-, historical-, grammatical-, literary-, form-, tradition-, redaction-, structuralist-, and canonical criticisms. Each chapter provides a brief introduction to the approach and presents the questions that biblical critics use to interrogate the text when employing that method. Hayes and Holladay do not intend for these chapters to be detailed “how to” guides for each approach (p. ix). Instead, the authors summarize the goals and presuppositions of the methods. Then, utilizing examples from both the Old and New Testaments, they demonstrate the results of the various modes of inquiry. One of the most commendable aspects of these chapters is the way the authors consistently integrate discussions of the history of biblical interpretation. The reader comes away with a clear sense of the evolution of methods and their interconnectedness.

In the nine central chapters on methods, the prose remains largely unchanged from the revised version, with a few notable exceptions. For example, the chapter on redaction criticism contains new introductory and concluding material (pp. 127, 135) that frames redaction-critical research as an exploration of expressly theological changes occurring within the compositional process. In doing so, Hayes and Holladay are characterizing redactors as bold theological visionaries and are conveying the concerns of redaction critics in ways that theological students can apprehend and appreciate. The authors have also modified the chapter on canonical criticism. Again, Hayes and Holladay show their keen understanding...
of the concerns of theological students. They provide several new paragraphs (pp. 157-158) outlining differences in the canons of various religious traditions (e.g., Jewish, Protestant, Roman Catholic) and indicating how these differences affect interpreters within those traditions. While Chapter 2, “Textual Criticism: The Quest for the Original Wording,” has not undergone substantive changes, the discussion could have been improved by some qualification of the phrase “original wording.” Even in basic text-critical research, students are increasingly likely to encounter scholarship that acknowledges the existence of multiple literary editions, which, of course, greatly complicates the idea of an “original” text.

Another important change is the updating and expansion of the bibliographies that conclude each chapter. In an introductory handbook, such bibliographies can quickly reach the point of diminishing returns. Beginning students might be overwhelmed by the number of recommended resources and not know where to start. The bibliography on historical criticism may be especially intimidating, since the list of resources is actually longer than the foregoing prose describing the method. To mitigate this problem, the authors have provided asterisks beside the titles they find particularly appropriate for beginning students. No doubt the expanded bibliographies will prove most helpful to students as their studies progress, though they should note that the bibliographies only cite English titles and contain no periodicals.

Chapter 11 “Exegesis with a Special Focus: Cultural, Economic, Ethnic, Gender and Sexual Perspectives” (pp. 167-177) is completely new material. In it, the authors acknowledge that other voices speaking “from the shadows of the marginalized” have introduced new perspectives and goals to biblical exegesis (p. 167). Given the amount of scholarly energy recently dedicated to these perspectives, some further discussion of how these voices have shaped “mainstream” methods would have been welcome. With the relatively brief treatment of issues such as feminist- and post-colonial approaches, the volume feels somewhat out of balance, especially since the authors have chosen to retain in toto the chapter on structuralist criticism (pp. 139-151); while on the cutting edge of biblical research in the early 1980s, this approach has relatively few practitioners now. The bibliography at the end of that chapter reveals as much, with no titles postdating 1993 (excluding reprints).

The book concludes with two chapters that serve as guides for theological students struggling to understand how to arrive at “an informed understanding of a text” among the plurality of methods. Students (and professors!) will be grateful for the very practical advice on writing exegesis papers in the chapter “Integrating Exegetical Procedures.” The book’s final chapter describes the ways one can apply exegesis to various other pursuits. The authors list and describe four such activities: reconstructing the history of Judaism and Christianity, formulating theological belief, guiding worship, and inspiring moral living. Theological students will appreciate how the authors, here again, demonstrate their familiarity with students’ concerns and priorities, especially with regard to the latter three forms of applied exegesis.

Finally, a particularly welcome addition to this volume is the appendix, in which Hayes and Holladay review biblical research software and internet resources. The value of published surveys of research software is relatively short-lived, as the authors freely admit. Yet, for now, the appendix is mostly up-to-date and helpful for outlining the capabilities and ease of use of the most popular programs (N.B. Accordance and BibleSoft PC Study Bible