Understanding the message of the New Testament is essential to the spiritual vitality of the believer and the church. When one attempts to interpret the Bible, he is venturing into the fields of exegesis and hermeneutics. What is exegesis and how does it relate to hermeneutics? Exegesis comes from a Greek word that can be translated “narrative, description, explanation, interpretation.” Hermeneutics also comes from a Greek word and can be translated “interpretation, exposition.” However, “Biblical scholars do not agree on the semantic range of these words, exegesis and hermeneutics.” Most scholars seem to agree with Walter Kaiser’s definition of exegesis: “the practice of and the set of procedures for discovering the author’s intended meaning.” Hermeneutics is generally presented as a broader topic. Grant Osborn reports that traditionally hermeneutics has meant “that science which delineates principles or methods for interpreting an individual author’s meaning.”


2Ibid., 393.


What is the relationship between exegesis and hermeneutics?\(^6\) No doubt one will find many different answers to this question. Grant Osborne provides a clear and pragmatic viewpoint that is adopted for this paper: “Hermeneutics encompasses both what it meant and what it means. . . . Hermeneutics is the overall term while exegesis and ‘contextualization’ (the cross-cultural communication of a text’s significance for today) are the two aspects of that larger task.”\(^7\) Based on a similar but modified division of hermeneutics and the following arguments of this paper, one may diagram the work of hermeneutics as follows.

![Table 1. Hermeneutics](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HERMENEUTICS</th>
<th>EXEGESIS</th>
<th>EXPOSITION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical Analysis</td>
<td>Linguistic Analysis</td>
<td>Theology</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Contextualization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is no one procedure for determining the meaning of a text. Many methodologies and perspectives are available for exegesis, none of which “can claim to provide the one authentic understanding of any given NT text.”\(^8\) I. Howard Marshall argues for a synthesis of methods: “In interpreting a passage a number of different lines of investigation must be followed.”\(^9\) What lines of investigation should be included and in what order should the

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\(^6\)A study of the history of exegesis would also be helpful for an inquiry into exegetical methodology, but it will not be treated within the limits of this paper.

\(^7\)Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 5. See also F. F. Bruce, “Interpretation of the Bible,” 565.


exegete proceed? This paper will attempt to answer these questions by surveying the methods available for exegesis and constructing a step-by-step synthesis of those which are most useful.

**Presuppositions**

Before a person can construct an exegetical method, he must establish the perspective and goals with which he wants to approach the Scripture. Everyone who attempts to interpret the Bible brings presuppositions to the text.\(^{10}\) “It may be useful to distinguish between the personal factors which affect the judgment of the interpreter (prejudices) and the philosophical or theological starting point which an interpreter takes and which he usually shares with some others (presuppositions).”\(^{11}\) Rudolf Bultmann argues that the exegete must not have any prejudices concerning the outcome of the exegesis, but that presuppositions are inevitable and necessary.\(^{12}\)

The presuppositions concerning Scripture upon which this exegetical method is built are expressed well by Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard:\(^{13}\) The Bible is God’s inspired revelation;\(^{14}\)

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\(^{13}\)Klein *et al*, *Biblical Interpretation*, 88–92.

\(^{14}\)See also Thompson, *Preaching Biblically*, 17–19.
it is authoritative and true;\textsuperscript{15} it is a spiritual document (and therefore can change lives); it is characterized by both unity and diversity; and it is understandable. Another presupposition is that the meaning of the text is discovered by grasping the original message intended by the author.\textsuperscript{16}

The ultimate goal of the interpretation of Scripture is to discern the normative truth of God for today and apply it to daily living.\textsuperscript{17} When one seeks this truth by identifying the intention of the author, the text becomes the main focus of exegesis.\textsuperscript{18}

If the exegete is seeking to identify the author’s historical message by studying the text, then he will construct an exegetical methodology in the tradition of grammatico-storical exegesis.\textsuperscript{19} Grammatico-historical exegesis determines the meaning of a passage by observing the grammar of the text and the historical setting in which it was written.\textsuperscript{20} “If the text of Scripture is the central concern, then a mastery of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek is a basic requirement. . . . The serious exegete should learn to master the basic principles of Greek and Hebrew grammar and syntax.”\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item See Osborne, Hermeneutical Spiral, 7; and Kaiser, Exegetical Theology, 46–47, 88.
\item See Klein et al, Biblical Interpretation, 19.
\item See Kaiser, Exegetical Theology, 88.
\item See Bultmann, “Exegesis Without Presuppositions,” 291 (Bultmann calls it “the historical method”); and Kaiser, Exegetical Theology, 88.
\item See Kaiser, Exegetical Theology, 87.
\item See Klein et al, Biblical Interpretation, 201, 203–204; David Alan Black, Using
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
biblical languages, the exegete should bring to the text an attitude of faith. His relationship to God, his surrender to authority of God’s Word, and the work of the Holy Spirit are vital to his understanding Scripture. Eduard Haller warns, “I can walk the road of exegesis rightly only . . . if I resist the temptation of divorcing intellectual activity and the listening attitude of faith.”

Exegetical Steps

Every biblical scholar uses a different set of exegetical steps, uses different terms and definitions, and places them in a different sequence. Table 2 is a comparison of selected exegetical methods. Of the sources consulted for this paper, seventeen of the authors proposed an exegetical method. Some wrote an entire book on their method, while others simply included an outline in an article. Some wrote with specific goals and contexts: Moises Silva wrote concerning Galatians, Scot McKnight addresses the interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels, Thomas Schreiner the Pauline epistles, and Gary Burge the Gospel of John.

Every exegetical step or approach that is mentioned by these authors is included at the left of the table; there are twenty in all. Although the authors used different terms to name these

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22Dockery, “Study and Interpretation,” 49.

23Haller, “Interpretive Task,” 163.


26Schreiner, Interpreting the Pauline Epistles.
steps, most of the terms in the table are self-explanatory or familiar. Those terms that are not clear will be explained below. The intersection of the authors and the exegetical steps are shaded in when the author utilizes that step. Of the twenty exegetical approaches, David Black uses the most (17), then Osborne and McKnight (10). Those approaches that are used the most by the seventeen authors are syntactical analysis and lexical analysis (16), historical background (15), and textual criticism (14). Those approaches that were used the least include historical criticism (4), form criticism and other critical issues (6), and source criticism, the use of secondary literature (explicitly mentioned by the author), and biblical theology (7).

Some of these terms require further explanation and each step should be evaluated for its contribution to exegesis. All the scholars consulted make some reference to “history” and the text. Some of the terms include “historical criticism,” “historical context,” “historical background,” and “historical setting.” The term “historical criticism” is used most frequently to refer to the historical-critical method, which seeks to verify the truth content of historical accounts.28 Although this method is traditionally executed with skepticism, “historical criticism” can be used to resolve historical problems found in the text.29

“Historical context,” “background,” and “setting” all refer to the situation and time-period in which the literature was written. This historical inquiry includes the introductory issues


of a passage (such as author, recipients, provenance, date, occasion, purpose, etc.) and the broader historical context of that time period. Studies in the broader historical context include investigations in geography, archeology, culture, religion, politics, society, economics, and military and war. Exploring the historical context of a passage is an important exegetical step because it is the context of communication that reveals its meaning. If the goal of exegesis is to identify the author’s original message, then understanding the historical context is necessary for accurate interpretation.

Another exegetical term that needs clarification is “literary criticism.” Many exegetical approaches are titled “literary criticism.” Such methods include genre analysis, the study of literary context, discourse analysis, and rhetorical criticism. Literary criticism’s main focus is on the text as a piece of literature over against its historical context and textual history.

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33 Osborne includes economics, and military and war in his background study. Osborne, Hermeneutical Spiral, 130–131.

34 Klein et al, Biblical Interpretation, 172.

35 Other disciplines are associated with the term “literary criticism” such as structuralism, deconstructionism, narrative criticism, reader-response, canon criticism, and formalism. These are not treated at length due to the limited nature of this paper. In addition, some are not exegetical steps, but hermeneutical perspectives, some of which do not agree with the presuppositions of this paper (see above).

36 McKnight, Synoptic Gospels, 122–123.
Identifying the genre of a biblical book and passage gives the exegete the perspective necessary to approach the text properly.\textsuperscript{37} The literary context of a passage includes the passage’s immediate context, the book, the author’s corpus, the testament context, and Bible context.\textsuperscript{38}

The author’s corpus, the testament context, and Bible context influence theological aspects of exegesis instead of literary aspects. This theological context constitutes a separate exegetical step called “theological analysis,”\textsuperscript{39} which will be discussed in more detail later. The immediate and book contexts are the primary concerns of discourse analysis.\textsuperscript{40} Tasks such as determining the units of the text,\textsuperscript{41} tracing the argument through the relationships between units, and identifying the theme of the whole book all fit into discourse analysis. All this is vital for exegesis because “the intended meaning of any passage is the meaning that is consistent with the sense of the literary context in which it occurs.”\textsuperscript{42}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Osborne, \textit{Hermeneutical Spiral}, 149–151.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Klein \textit{et al}, \textit{Biblical Interpretation}, 161.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Kaiser, \textit{Exegetical Theology}, 131ff.
\item \textsuperscript{41} A discourse can be divided in many ways: by content only (the traditional outline approach), linguistically, through epistolary analysis, or through rhetorical analysis. Epistolary analysis is regarded as a part of genre analysis in this paper. There is a strong argument for the superiority of linguistic divisions over the others. Epistolary and rhetorical analyses should be based on units established by a study of the linguistic clues in the text. It may also be helpful to synthesize all these outlines on one diagram.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Klein \textit{et al}, \textit{Biblical Interpretation}, 156.
\end{itemize}
Rhetorical analysis is a study of “stylistic method for getting across a message.”\textsuperscript{43} This occurs on three levels: the function of the book, the function of the units within the book, and the compositional techniques used within the units.\textsuperscript{44} In the study of Greco-Roman rhetoric there were three major forms which describe the function of any discourse: judicial (arguments in a controversy), deliberative (exhortations for an issue), and epideictic (the praising or blaming of persons).\textsuperscript{45} The units within the book can also have one of several rhetorical functions according to the basic elements of Greco-Roman rhetoric.\textsuperscript{46} Rhetorical and stylistic devices are used within the units such as alliteration, antithesis, asyndeton, chiasmus, hyperbole, irony, metaphor, and paronomasia.\textsuperscript{47}

Not only is the exegete to consider the historical and literary context of the passage, but he will also examine its details. Many scholars regard textual analysis, translation, lexical analysis, grammatical analysis, syntactical analysis, and structural analysis as the primary work of exegesis.\textsuperscript{48} The exegete must establish the original reading according the principles and

\textsuperscript{43}Osborne, \textit{Hermeneutical Spiral}, 35.

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid.


\textsuperscript{46}The \textit{exordium} (the statement of the cause), \textit{narratio} (the background and facts of the case), \textit{argumentatio} (the main argument), and \textit{peroratio} (the summarization and final arguments). The \textit{argumentatio} may also include a \textit{propositio} (that which is or is not agreed upon), a \textit{probatio} (proofs and logical arguments), or a \textit{refutatio} (refutation of opponents’ arguments). See Blomberg, “The Diversity of Literary Genres,” 281.


\textsuperscript{48}McKnight, Synoptic Gospels, 51; Kaiser, \textit{Exegetical Theology}, 48; Osborne, \textit{Hermeneutical Spiral}, 146.
procedures of textual criticism and translate the text. Then, in order to discover the author’s original message it is vital that the exegete discern the meaning of the words in each particular context. The immediate context is comprised of the grammatical relationships within the text. Some scholars divide grammar into morphology, “how words are inflected,” and syntax, “the system each language has for combining its various constituents in order to communicate.” Others refer to grammar as “the basic laws of language behind the relationships between the terms in the surface structure.” The second definition is not an exegetical step, but the foundation of syntactical analysis. Although the division in the first definition appears legitimate, all grammatical relationships can effectively be subsumed under the term “syntactical analysis.” Without examining the syntax of a passage, it is impossible to discovering the author’s original message.

As the exegete examines the text, he should also consider what sources the author used and how he utilized them. One major area of study in sources is the use of the Old Testament in the New. In addition to this, there are several issues surrounding the synoptic gospels. These are addressed in the exegetical step sometimes called “tradition analysis.” Tradition analysis explores the history of the text such as source, form, and redaction criticism. The source critic

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49 Klein et al, Biblical Interpretation, 183.


51 Osborne, Hermeneutical Spiral, 41. See also Furnish, “Practical Guidelines,” 6.


seeks to identify sources that an author used; form criticism is the study of the oral
transmission of the sources; and the redaction critic analyzes how an author arranged and edited
his sources.\textsuperscript{54}

Source criticism is the study of the literary interdependence of the synoptic gospels.
This is not actually an exegetical analysis of a text. One’s solution to the synoptic problem will
influence his approach to the text, especially his use of redaction criticism.\textsuperscript{55} As one reconstructs
the history of the oral transmission of the text, he is concerned with the “forms” and life settings
in which they were transmitted.\textsuperscript{56} Since so much of form criticism is speculative, the only
contribution it makes to exegesis is the “forms” of the pericopes.\textsuperscript{57} Carson, Moo, and Morris
conclude, “Form and source criticism, both of which, in their concern with prehistory of the
gospel tradition, are important for the historian of early Christianity but of only minimal help to
the interpreter.”\textsuperscript{58} Therefore, form criticism does not warrant an exegetical step of its own, but
one’s genre analysis should be informed by form critical studies.

Finally, redaction criticism is valuable for its emphasis on the parallels in the synoptic
gospels. However, the weakness of redaction criticism is its dependence upon a solution to the
synoptic problem. McKnight acknowledges, “This discipline requires that one isolate sources
and redactional alterations. But we can never be absolutely certain


\textsuperscript{55}McKnight, \textit{Synoptic Gospels}, 84.

\textsuperscript{56}Ibid., 72.

\textsuperscript{57}Ibid., 78–79.

\textsuperscript{58}Carson et al, \textit{Introduction}, 45.
about some of these matters since we can never be totally confident of a solution to the Synoptic Problem.” Therefore, the theological emphases one might find in a redaction study are of minimal value. One question may be offered for further investigation: Are there any theological emphases discovered in a redaction study that are not apparent in a careful study of the text on its own?

The last topic to discuss concerning exegetical methodology is theology. Does theology belong in the exegetical task? Most scholars seem to answer, “Yes!” Furnish reasons, “New Testament exegesis is not complete if it does not deal also with the theology of the texts. This is so because, without notable exception, the New Testament writers themselves have an explicitly theological objective when writing.” The exegete should interpret the author’s message in a particular passage in light of the theological themes and teachings found in the same book, the author’s corpus, the New Testament, and the whole Bible. The next step, determining the timeless truth principles in the text for application, moves into exposition toward contextualization.

59 McKnight, *Synoptic Gospels*, 89. He gives a rejoinder, “When there is a near majority on the Markan hypothesis, many uncertainties can be removed.” Ibid. He states this as if a majority agreement on an issue validates its truth value.


62 Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 131–146. He emphasizes “antecedent Scripture” as most important for theological analysis.

63 See Table 1 above.
In light of this evaluation, the following list organizes the areas of study that are most useful for exegesis (not in sequential order):

Table 3. Useful Areas of Study for Exegesis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical Context</th>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Historical background</td>
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<tr>
<th>Literary Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discourse Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Determine the units of the text</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trace the argument (relationship of units)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify the discourse theme</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Analysis</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textual Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>Translation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lexical Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Syntactical Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structural Analysis</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cross References</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of OT in NT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gospel parallels</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theological Analysis</th>
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**Proposed Order for an Exegetical Method**

Once the exegete has chosen the necessary exegetical steps, he may now determine the most effective order in which to execute them. He will soon discover that these phases of exegesis are not easily divided. Furnish warns that they cannot be “hermetically separated one from another, or retained in a rigid chronological sequence.”64 Instead, “The steps in exegesis . . . are blended into a continuous flow of ever new transitions.”65 The problem becomes apparent

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65 Haller, “Interpretive Task,” 164.
when one finds that a good outline of a book and its theme cannot really be established until
the details of the book are studied, and a thorough study of the details are not accurately
understood until a good outline of a book and its theme are established. Malherbe describes this
dynamic,

Any analysis of a text should therefore be conscious of two aspects of any one element: (1)
the peculiar meaning that it has as an isolated entity, i.e., the meaning that it will contribute
to the whole, and (2) the conditioning that it undergoes as a part of the whole to which it
contributes.  

There should be a constant movement, then, between analysis of the macrostructure and the
microstructure of a passage. One’s method should reflect this movement by not attempting to
carry out, for instance, all the historical analysis at one point in the process.

Many methodologies begin with the historical background. Kaiser writes, “There is
an absolutely fundamental and essential work in background studies which must precede the in-
depth study of the selected passage.” Osborne explains that knowing the historical context will
“narrow down the interpretive laws so that we might ask the proper questions.” He warns that
these are preliminary conclusions that should direct, but not dictate, the study of the text. Next,
the exegete should consider the literary context of his passage by conducting a preliminary
discourse analysis. This discourse analysis will include a determination of units according to


68See Walter L. Liefeld, New Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon (Grand Rapids:
Zondervan, 1984), 29; Fee, Osborne, Black, Dockery, and McKnight.

69Kaiser, Exegetical Theology, 42.

70Osborne, Hermeneutical Spiral, 21.

71Ibid.
linguistic devices, a structural diagram and summary of each unit, the tracing of the thought
development, and the identification of the discourse theme.

Before addressing the details of the text it will also be helpful to identify the genre of
the book and units (if applicable), and to do a rhetorical analysis of the book and the functions of
the units. When the exegete moves to a particular passage, establishing the text through a textual
analysis is normally executed first. Then he may attempt to translate the text, but he will soon
find many translational decisions require lexical, grammatical, syntactical, and structural
analyses. “In a sense, translation can only proceed after all of the other tasks of exegesis have
been accomplished.” It is helpful at this point, however, to do a preliminary translation in order
to become familiar with the text and become aware of the lexical, grammatical, syntactical, and
structural issues. Lexical analysis or semantics is the study of the meanings of the words that
appear in the text. Although this seems to be a logical first step, many lexical decisions are made
on other contextual issues that involve grammar, syntax, and structure. Referring to grammar,
semantics, and syntax, Osborne suggests, “The interpreter . . . will consider all three at the same
time when studying the surface structure (sentences) in order to delineate the original intended
meaning.” The exegete might begin with lexical analysis, answering syntactical questions as
necessary. Then, after conducting a more thorough syntactical analysis, he can diagram the
syntactical relationships.

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York: Seabury, 1981) 45; Osborne, Furnish, Malherbe, Egger, Black, Silva, and McKnight.


75 Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 41.
With the details of the passage at hand, the exegete can now return to rhetorical analysis by identifying the rhetorical devices used by the author within the unit. A common rhetorical strategy of the New Testament is to use the Old Testament as a source. These, as well as other cross references (such as gospel parallels) should be noted at this point in the exegetical process. All through the previous steps, the Bible student will have encountered aspects of the passage that would be made clearer by further historical research. As he does more historical analysis, he may also return to and evaluate his previous historical analysis for accuracy in light of his exegetical work.

It is now time for the exegete to step back from the details of the text and identify the theological themes he has uncovered. A theological analysis includes the identification of the themes of the passage and the main theme of the passage, and interpretation of the author’s message in light of the use of these themes within the same book, within the author’s corpus, within antecedent Scripture, and within the whole Bible. Now all of this work can be expressed in an accurate and polished final translation as well as a paraphrase which more fully captures the passage’s sense. Finally, the Bible student can compare his own findings with the preliminary historical and discourse analyses with which he started and make the necessary adjustments.
Table 4. An Exegetical Method in Logical Sequence

Historical Analysis: Introductory Matters and Background
Preliminary Discourse Analysis
  Determination of Units
  Structural Diagrams
  Summarize Units
  Trace flow of thought
  Name Discourse Theme
Genre Analysis: Book and Units
Rhetorical Analysis
  Book
  Function of Units
Textual Analysis
Preliminary Translation
Lexical Analysis
Syntactical Analysis
Structural Analysis: Revise Structural Diagram
Rhetorical Analysis within Units
Cross References:
  Use of OT in NT
  Gospel Parallels
Historical Background in Light of Text
Reevaluation Historical Context
Theological Analysis
Final Translation and Paraphrase
Reevaluate Discourse Analysis

The Linguistic-Historical Method?

As was expressed in the presuppositions, the perspective of this methodology is in sympathy with the grammatico-historical method. However, as Kaiser argues, this name “fails to go far enough in describing the main job of exegesis.” He suggests the “syntactical–theological exegesis” as a better description. “Syntactical” is a better description than “grammatical,” but

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76 Kaiser, *Exegetical Theology*, 89.
77 Ibid., 88.
does it go far enough? There are still many steps that are not being described. His emphasis on the importance of theology is also well noted, but does its position in the exegetical method warrant a place in the name?

The term “linguistics” seems to cover a greater number of exegetical steps than either “syntactical” or “theological.” Silva states, “It would be only a mild exaggeration to say that interpretation is all about language.”78 According to Black linguistics includes grammar, syntax, semantics, and discourse analysis.79 Max Turner also includes these as well as structure analysis.80 In addition, Kummel places translation and lexical analyses under the heading “linguistics.”81 Osborne suggests, “Exegesis proper could be subdivided into linguistic and cultural aspects.”82 “Historical” instead of “cultural” would be a more inclusive term. Therefore, it seems that “linguistic-historical exegesis” is the best name to describe this methodology. “Theology” is not in the title because, as table 1 and 3 demonstrate, it is not the dominant approach, but only a small fraction of the exegetical method.

“Linguistic” should be placed before “historical” for two reasons. First, the linguistics describes the majority of exegetical steps.

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78 Silva, Interpreting Galatians, 41.

79 Black, Linguistics, 53–197.


81 Kummel, Exegetical Method, 46–47.

82 Osborne, Hermeneutical Spiral, 41.
Second, those issues dealing with language and the text are more important. Osborne argues, “The text is primary and not background material.” Many scholars claim with McKnight that “Grammar and Syntax constitute the essence of exegesis.” The language of the text is where the actual message is found, the historical context is used only to help the exegete understand the message. If the exegete can discover the intention of the original writer, he can then find the timeless truths of God for today and apply them to his life. Therefore, along with Schreiner, “I

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83 Textual Criticism could also be categorized under “linguistic analysis.” Silva writes, “Textual transmission may be regarded as a form of linguistic communication.” Silva, *Interpreting Galatians*, 41.


have often wondered why biblical exegesis is not the consuming passion of pastors and students.\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{86}Schreiner, \textit{Pauline Epistles}, 16.