

## A Tool Kit for Exegesis

### Exegesis

from a Greek word meaning 'lead out'. We seek to 'draw out' of the biblical text all that it has to say to us.

The opposite of exegesis is 'eisegesis' – reading into the text what we want it to say or to mean.

### Tools

Different types for different jobs. Garden tools, for example, can help us grow food (or dig for treasure).

Sharp edges – sharp questions.

### Use This Tool Kit

- for preparing sermons and bible studies (and assignments, if doing further study);
- flexibly. Some tools will be useful for one passage, but not much help with another. If a question is not useful, move on to the next one. Learn to use your own judgement.



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## 1 Finding the Text

### Which passage shall I study?

May be already chosen for you (assignment, lectionary).

Avoid cutting a poem or oracle in the middle of a line, or a narrative in the middle of an action or speech. (Divisions in modern bible translations may help– but use your own judgment.)

## 2 Surveying the Text - First Impressions

### What seems to be going on in this passage? What does it seem to be about?

Read the bible passage several times, fairly quickly. Use different translations. Do not get into detailed analysis yet.



Have you heard / read this text before? Does it bring any memories? Do you think you already know what it is about? Are you prepared to learn something new from it, even if that will challenge you? Be prayerfully open.

Write briefly your first impression of what the text is about. But be willing to change your views as you proceed!

### 3 Context – the Wider Picture

Which biblical book is this passage from? What do I already know about that book?

Where does this passage come within this particular book?

Remember what you know about this book. Read a short introduction to the book as a whole in a study bible or bible dictionary. What were the main characteristics of the people for whom it was written? What prompted the author to write this book?

Examine the verses which precede and follow this one. Which major section in the book is this passage part of? What has happened in the book so far? What happens after this passage?



### 4 Form / Genre

What kind of writing is this passage?

Is it prose or poetry?

Is it historical narrative? Prophecy? Apocalyptic? Wisdom? Law? Gospel? Parable? etc.

What are the distinctive characteristics of this particular kind of writing?

### 5 Structure and Movement

How is this passage organised? Is there any progression from beginning to end?

Break the passage down into sections. To identify a section, look for a new subject, or issue, or speaker, or location. Give each section a heading (in your own words) which summarises its content and purpose.

Look out for:

- repetition of words, phrases or ideas;
- how the passage starts and finishes (is the ending similar to the beginning – or quite different?);
- chiasmic / step structures (like a mirror - eg ABCB'A' – key idea in the centre);

If you are reading a narrative, is there any surprising twist in the story, or moment of climax in the action?

Is there any crisis, tension or conflict in a narrative – is it resolved, or left unresolved at the end?

Is there any flow in the argument, or progression in the story?

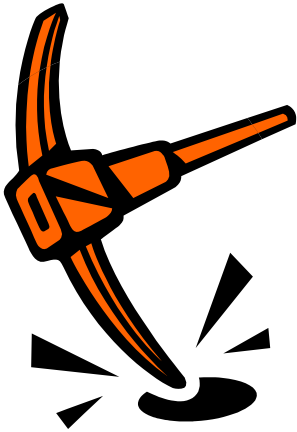


## 6 Digging Deeper – Detailed Analysis

What is the main point of each part of the passage?

How does the writer make these points?

How do the details in the passage support these main points?



Focus on what you consider to be key words in the passage.

- What do you think they mean in this passage? See if these words are used elsewhere in this particular book (a Concordance may help you here).

Look at the characters in the passage.

- What are they saying and doing? What is being said and done to them?
- How do they relate to each other?

Look at the verbs in each sentence.

- What tenses do you find – past, present, future? Does one tense predominate?
- What moods do you find in the verbs? Do they express certainty or uncertainty; commands or encouragements? Is there any threat or promise expressed?

Look for any questions in the passage.

- What is asked? Who asks it?
- Is the question answered?

Look for imagery, symbolism, metaphor, simile.

- How should this be understood?
- What effect does it have on the reader?

Look for any logical connecting words, which help in understanding; eg 'therefore', 'because', 'in order to', 'although'.

Use your imagination; enter into the world of the text. What are the characters thinking and feeling?

Is there any irony (two levels of meaning) in the text?

Has the writer used any sources in this text? If so, for what purpose? Look out especially for quotations or echoes from the OT, both in NT passages and in other OT passages.

Learn to be selective: focus on the details which are most significant and which affect the main message.

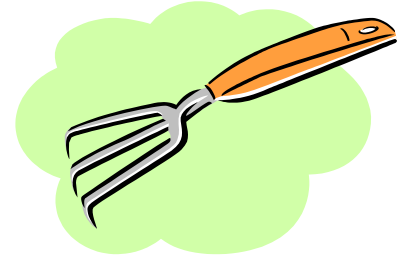
## 7 The Big Picture – Finding the Centre

**What is the main point (or main points) of the passage?**

Write down in one sentence the main point/central idea of each section of the passage.

Now write down in one further sentence what all these parts add up to: the main point of the whole passage. Try to find a key word or phrase from the text which highlights this main point.

What response do you think the author wanted from the original readers/hearers?



## 8 Learning from Others - Secondary Literature

**What do commentators say about this passage?**

Look up key words from the passage in a theological dictionary. Note down any helpful information.

Read two or three commentaries on the passage. Notice ways in which they share your views, and ways in which they differ. What do you think about the differences? You may want to refine and expand some of what you have written. But don't feel you have to change your view just because of what you read in the commentary!



## 9 So What? Applying the Text Today

**What does this passage mean for me, and for our church, today?**

**What does this passage say about God, and about God's claim on us today?**

Notice what effect the passage has on you personally.

- Does it inspire? warn? teach? threaten? promise?
- Does it make you feel happy? sad? guilty? angry? confused? secure? insecure?
- Does it lead you to think and feel differently from the way you did before?
- Does it challenge and move you to change your beliefs and your behaviour?
- Does the text leave you with unanswered questions? If so, write them down.

Observe also the effect which this passage has on others in the church. Do they already have particular questions and ideas about it? If so, keep these in mind as you prepare your sermon.

Look out for universal hopes, fears and values expressed in the passage – those which transcend any particular culture. Look also for unusual beliefs and values expressed in it. What does the passage affirm about God's character, God's relationship with human beings, human beings' relationships with each other?

Look for any contemporary issues or situations which seem genuinely comparable to those addressed in the text. In what ways are they similar, and in what ways are they different? How do the principles or events in the passage speak to our situation?

What kind of community does this passage urge its readers to become? How can we embody that in our church?

