

Introducing Students to Biblical Exegesis

Note: Step 6, “Teach Source Criticism, Using Four Different Side-by-Side Biblical Translations,” comes before the general introduction to biblical criticism.

Introducing Biblical Criticism

College and graduate students in theology are more likely than many teens to learn about and use exegesis. But exegesis resembles what students do in English and social studies classes as they examine literature or events in light of historical or cultural factors. In addition, helping students to see that there are ways they can better understand the Bible can lead them to look further into exegesis and biblical commentary later on.

The teacher guide suggests you use the handout “Biblical Exegesis Chart” (Document #: TX001090). If you have a chart you prefer, by all means use it. You may also wish to add or delete from the chart to suit your desire to emphasize some forms over others.

Step 9 introduces biblical criticism, but several learning experiences in unit 1 use biblical criticism. Here are some points to keep in mind as you teach the concept of biblical criticism:

- Make sure the students understand that *critical* does not mean a negative judgment here. It means being careful.
- Students may wonder how the Bible can be examined much like a book or an historical era. As Revelation (to be covered in unit 2) the Bible is not a piece of writing that we want to take apart and argue the meaning of. Instead, because the Bible is the Word of God, exegesis attempts to give us the best chance of learning what God was revealing through the authors of the Bible, human beings who naturally would use language, storytelling, and their current historical experience of God as the tools to get across their message.
- Students should know that not everyone reads the Bible the same way. Some believe they can take words or phrases or stories right out of the Bible and apply them to the modern world without learning the context in which they were written. Catholic biblical scholars use a contextual reading of the Bible when trying to see how biblical wisdom applies to the modern day.
- Although we are separated from the biblical authors by time, culture, and language, they still address issues that we commonly encounter. To help the students to understand this concept, you may want to use an example the students can relate to. For example, compare and contrast the era in which their parents grew up with the era in which they are growing up. Their parents may not have had cell phones, text messaging, and iPods, but the issues they experienced in growing up— independence, supervision, and trust between teens and parents—were much the same as those teens experience today. Some issues seem timeless. In the same way, even though the historical situation of the biblical authors and our historical situation today are different, the life issues we face are much the same.
- Can *anyone* engage in biblical exegesis? Yes and no. You might want to draw the parallel between the self-help things we do (put on bandages and take cough medicine) and the level of knowledge that a doctor has. Although we can learn more about the context in which a passage was written, we do not have the same knowledge and skill as scholars whose study we benefit from.
- A particular story or passage in the Bible can be fully understood only within the complete picture of both the Old and New Testaments, especially in relationship to the life, teachings, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Gossip often thrives when someone takes a comment out of context. In the same way, looking at a single passage in the Bible apart from the rest of the Bible’s message could lead someone to misinterpret it completely.



- One way of thinking about the analogy of faith is to think of a spider web. If one were to pull one section of the web, the rest of it would vibrate because of the relationship between the strands. Doctrines or teachings relate to one another rather than being random statements.

The Handout “Biblical Exegesis Chart” (Document #: TX001090)

When going over the “Biblical Exegesis Chart” handout (Document #: TX001090) with the students, you may want to keep these points in mind:

- *Textual criticism*: If you completed step 6 with your students, note that they have already experienced a form of textual criticism—the attempt to learn something from comparing different translations of the Bible. The teacher guide invites you to take the short study of Matthew 5:13–16 and explain how scholars might take other exegetical approaches to the same passage.
- *Literary criticism*: You may want to introduce literary criticism by referring to article 21, “Literary Forms in the Bible,” and having the students take turns reading it aloud in class.

Answers to the Handout “Practicing Biblical Exegesis” (Document #: TX001091)

Though you and your students may apply other forms of biblical criticism to these passages, two appropriate forms of biblical criticism are listed for each passage here.

1. The Letter to the Romans

Literary criticism would look at the letter as a type of literature and ask what we can expect to learn from this type of writing as well as possibly examine the roles of letters at the time. *Source criticism* would ask if there are any other contemporary letters like Paul’s that would shed light on the content or form of Paul’s letters.

2. Matthew 16:13–23, Mark 8:27–33, and Luke 9:18–22

Textual criticism would examine the three accounts of encounters with Jesus, noticing the similarities and differences and asking why these three might resemble or differ from one another because of the audience the Gospel writer was addressing, the time it was written, or because the author emphasized certain themes over others. *Historical criticism* would ask questions about the references in some stories, such as what is the significance of John the Baptist, Elijah, or Jeremiah, and how does Jesus resemble them? What does the phrase “the Son of Man” mean? Who did the Jews expect in a Messiah?

3. The Parable of the Mustard Seed, Luke 13:18–19

Literary criticism would ask about the literary genre of the parable and look at the metaphors, examining Jesus’ statement in light of similar statements he makes. *Historical criticism* would explore the mustard seed and plant, one that many modern Americans are not familiar with, to make what Jesus is saying clearer.



4. Matthew 3:1–6, Mark 1:1–6, and Luke 3:1–6

Textual criticism would examine the three accounts introducing John the Baptist, noticing the similarities and differences and asking why these three might resemble or differ from one another because of the audience the Gospel writer was addressing, the time it was written, or because the author emphasized certain themes over others. *Historical criticism* might look into the significance of Luke’s mention of so many political and religious leaders, it might investigate the significance of the Jordan River, or it might explore the prophet Isaiah because he is quoted here.

5. See Matthew 16:18, “You are the rock upon which I build my church” (*ekklesia*, Greek, “the church, those called together”).

Textual criticism benefits here from a knowledge of Greek. The Greek word used for Church in the text (*ekklesia*), with the meaning listed above, could tell us something about the way the Gospel authors understood the purpose of the early Christian community (because the Gospels were recorded some time after the actual events occurred and reflect the wisdom of a generation or two of early Christians). *Historical criticism* might evaluate Jesus’ statement to learn more about what he planned for his church—that it would have a solid foundation with Peter as its head.

Biblical Exegesis in the Rest of Unit 1

Unit 1 offers several activities about biblical exegesis.

- **Step 10** presents two different ways to use source criticism. You may do one, both, or none.
 - The excerpt from the Epic of Gilgamesh presents a flood narrative that shares similarities with the Flood narratives in Genesis. This learning experience provides an opportunity for the students to see how the Book of Genesis arose in the way that other myths about creation and floods did. It also enables them to identify differences. Ask, why might these differences exist? (See the article “The Story of Noah and Other Flood Narratives” ([Document #: TX001003])
 - You may want to present the JEDP theory with the students who have understood biblical criticism quickly. Looking at the authors J, E, D, and P can help the students to understand some of the stories in Genesis that have more than one version and are also different in tone. Examples of multiple versions include the Creation stories (see Genesis 1:1—2:5–25), Noah and the Flood (see Genesis 6:5—9:29), and the stories of Abram and Sarai’s encounter with Pharaoh and Abimelech (see Genesis 12:10–20 and 20:1–18). See the article “The JEDP Theory” (Document #: TX001002) for more background on this theory.
- **Step 13** is an interesting examination of the Flood story as portrayed by a modern-day movie. Ask the students to compare the movie to the original story in Genesis. What are there the similarities and differences? What do the similarities and the differences indicate?
- **Step 14** invites the students to find some exegetical resources online. Make sure the students share the best that they find with one another. As a class you may want to create a list to duplicate and distribute to the students for the rest of the course.
- **Final Performance Tasks.** The final performance tasks require that the students use some type of exegesis as part of their project. Know that they may need additional guidance here.



Print Resources for Biblical Exegesis

General Resources

Brown, Raymond E., SS, Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (paperback reprint). Third edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000.

Halbur, Virginia. *Saint Mary's Press® College Study Bible, New American Bible*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2006. This resource contains the footnotes of a New American Bible in addition to articles by biblical scholars that introduce biblical books and give more insight into different aspects of the Bible.

Singer-Towns, Brian. *Biblical Literacy Made Easy: A Practical Guide for Catechists, Teachers, and Youth Ministers*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2008.

Singer-Towns, Brian. *Saint Mary's Press® Essential Quick Charts: Interpreting the Bible*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2009. This is a perfect summary of key elements of biblical criticism.

Historical Criticism

Albl, Martin C. *Saint Mary's Press® Essential Guide to Biblical Life and Times*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2009. Understanding biblical people's cultural context is an important skill in biblical literacy. This mini-encyclopedia on biblical life and times will raise your scriptural knowledge and understanding to the next level.

Concordances

Kohlenberger III, John R., ed. *The New American Bible Concise Concordance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. This concordance is quite complete without being overwhelming. A great classroom resource.

Singer-Towns, Brian, ed. *Saint Mary's Press® Essential Bible Concordance, New American Bible*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2006. This very basic concordance can also be found for the New Revised Standard Version translation and in the back of the second editions of the *Catholic Youth Bible®*.

Bible Dictionaries

Achtemeier, Paul J., ed. *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.

O'Connell-Roussell, Sheila. *Saint Mary's Press® Essential Bible Dictionary*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2005. This resource can also be found online at www.smp.org/LivinginChrist.

