

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. Here are some points to keep in mind as you teach the concept of biblical exegesis, sometimes called biblical criticism:

- Make sure the students understand that *critical* does not mean a negative judgment here. It means careful or attentive.
- The students may wonder how the Bible can be examined much like a book or a historical era. As Revelation, the Bible is not a piece of writing 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.
- The students should know that not everyone reads the Bible the same way. Some believe they can take words, 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, those authors still address issues we commonly encounter. To help the students to understand this concept, you may want to use an example they can relate to. For example, compare and contrast the era in which their parents grew up with the era in which the students 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 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 among the strands. Doctrines or teachings relate to one another rather than being random statements.

Helpful Print Resources

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. 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.

Saint Mary's Press® Essential Quick Charts: Interpreting the Bible. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2009. A perfect summary of key elements of biblical criticism.

Historical Criticism

Abi, 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, John R., III, ed. *The New American Bible Concise Concordance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. 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. 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 HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.

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

