

# EXEGETICAL FALLACIES: INTRODUCTION

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Last Updated: 12/04/2014

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***Abstract* — Exegesis is required in order to determine the meaning of the biblical text. However, not all methods are legitimate ways for deriving meaning. Some methods are based upon unsustainable premises that lead to wrong interpretations of the text. Such methods are termed *fallacies* because they are methods that yield false conclusions about the text. There are many fallacies that can be committed in the process of exegesis, and this article will introduce the major fallacies that must be avoided when determining the meaning of Scripture.**

***General Research Topic(s)* — Principles of Biblical Interpretation, Exegesis/Hermeneutics, Exegetical Fallacies, How to Study and Interpret the Bible.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Whenever reading any literature, understanding of its meaning comes through an interpretive process. Such an interpretive process operates on a wide variety of principles and rules in order to generate coherent meaning that is consistent. Readers of the Bible are faced with this interpretive process every time they read Scripture but on a much more challenging scale since the text is both ancient and foreign. This poses many obstacles which the reader must overcome to ascertain its meaning. Thus, it is necessary to enter into the realm of performing “exegesis.”

Exegesis is the act of drawing out the meaning of a text. Students of Scripture perform exegesis in order to determine meaning and thus understand the text. They do this by adhering to a set of rules or principles that

govern the way meaning is established. These rules or principles have been developed according to an orderly system of approach that aids the interpreter in obeying universal laws of language and communication.

Exegesis is at the very foundation of the process of interpretation, but the whole process does not consist of only exegesis. However, in this article, when mentioning the interpretive process or the interpretation of Scripture, it is the exegetical component that is being referred to. Other factors involved in the interpretive process are certainly acknowledge as being indispensable, but they are outside the scope of this article, which will only focus on the methods for drawing out the meaning of the text.

When attempting to understand the meaning of a text, there are good and not so good methods to accomplishing this. Some methods may seem logical and they tend to make sense on some level of reasoning, but in fact they are actually misleading and obstructive to achieving a sound interpretation of the text. What makes certain methods not so good is not that they are wrong according to some standard criteria for interpretation invented by theologians. They are deemed “not good” because empirically they are inconsistent, arbitrary, or opinion-based, yielding deviant results that cannot be trusted to represent the meaning of the text.

Exegetical fallacies are rules or principles that appear logical and in congruence with the laws of language and communication, but when probed deeper,

they are found to be erroneous and deceiving. Exegetical fallacies are important to recognize because they produce inaccuracies in the collection of evidence that then misguide the interpreter and lead them to a false understanding of Scripture. These fallacies are frequently committed by uninformed readers of the text because it is easy to ignorantly devise justification for evidence agreeable to one's sensibilities when unaware that one is currently violating a law of language, logic, or communication.

Endeavoring to expose exegetical fallacies is endeavoring to thinking critically about interpreting a text. Critical thinking is the precursor to sound interpretation. If we can't substantiate a particular position through lexical, grammatical, cultural, theological, historical, and other technical evidence, then what we are left with is our own biased perspective, also called a "private interpretation" (cf. 2 Pet 1:20).

Critical exegesis is the application of critical thinking to the study and investigation of the meaning of Scripture. In other words, it is exegesis that utilizes evidential justification for the conclusions it reaches and the positions it adopts. Many times more than one viewpoint (interpretation) can be substantiated in part by the evidence depending on the weight and significance assigned to particular assertions and claims that the evidence provides.

D. A. Carson has written a well-known work on this subject entitled: *Exegetical Fallacies*.<sup>1</sup> What is important, as D. A. Carson advocates, is that "interpreters are involved in critical exegesis, exegesis that provides, or attempts to provide, adequate justification of all conclusions reached and of every

point held."<sup>2</sup> An interpreter that is not involved in critical exegesis is an interpreter looking for *their* meaning of Scripture, not the meaning inherent in the text.

The need for critical exegesis is imperative to obtaining a sound interpretation of Scripture. The drawbacks from avoiding it or distorting it are many and quite severe. As Carson continues to elaborate,

*"Careful handling of the Bible will enable us to 'hear' it a little better. It is all too easy to read the traditional interpretations we have received from others into the text of Scripture. Then we may unwittingly transfer the authority of Scripture to our traditional interpretations and invest them with a false, even an idolatrous, degree of certainty. Because traditions are reshaped as they are passed on, after a while we may drift far from God's Word while still insisting all our theological opinions are "biblical" and therefore true. If when we are in such a state we study the Bible uncritically, more than likely it will simply reinforce our errors. If the Bible is to accomplish its work of continual reformation—reformation of our lives and our doctrine—we must do all we can to listen to it afresh and to utilize the best resources at our disposal."*<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, conducting critical exegesis is meant to provide valid reasoning for reaching conclusions, but in the process we must also learn to reject invalid reasoning so as to not build a false premise behind our search for meaning. Identifying exegetical fallacies enables us to remove biases and erroneous patterns of thinking that do not form acceptable principles of interpretation. Accepted principles of interpretation are those that are universal and derived from the course of repeatable deduction, veritable forms of logic, rules of grammar and communication, as well as many other

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<sup>1</sup> A majority of this article is largely based on D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996). Some content has been modified, added to, and/or omitted, and therefore, this article should not be taken as reproducing or in agreement with all of Carson's views.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

established laws that are reliable guides for determining meaning.

Avoiding exegetical fallacies is not a “fool-proof” way to ascertain the right interpretation; they merely help prevent an interpreter from stumbling, often ignorantly, toward a wrong (i.e., private) interpretation. But, if unaware of exegetical fallacies, any private interpretation can sound like a right interpretation. This is the great danger and folly of exegetical fallacies. They can seem to be rational (logical), deductive, and can employ a range of technical analyses, but if the initial premise or the pursued methods are faulty, the conclusion will likely be so as well.

The better one understands exegetical fallacies, the better one can discern a good argument from a bad one or a strong argument from a weak one. Exegetical fallacies are simply methods used in the interpretive process that violate some law of language, logic, or reasoning. Such methods simply will not work. What that means is that when asked pointed questions, examined under scrutiny, or contemplated with any rigor, the reasoning or conclusions break down, fall apart, and are shown to be defective, like a bucket full of holes that can't hold any water. Exegetical fallacies expose a weak link in the chain of the interpretive process that would crack when placed under any sort of “pressure” (e.g., questioning, review, counter-evidence, etc.).

What studying exegetical fallacies forces us to do is to engage in self-criticism of our exegetical practices. Most of our exegetical habits and approach to interpreting Scripture come from what has been passed on to us by educators in our life (e.g., parents, older siblings and relatives, Sunday school teachers, pastors, etc.). But if a person is not careful or even cognizant of the methods they have inherited, their interpretive process will always be governed by their theological tendencies and prior beliefs. In other words, during our interpretive process we won't listen to what Scripture

actually says because we won't know what to listen for; we will only hear the voice of what we think Scripture has always meant. And most often that is the voice of a human authority we subconsciously choose to believe over the authority of Scripture, not because we deny the authority of Scripture altogether, but because we think Scripture agrees with our position since we have simply always had a particular reason to believe as much.

Let's be honest here, most adept interpreters defend their position with solid evidence from Scripture. And we all know that there is an assortment of theological positions out there on any given passage. Accordingly, most interpreters point to the authority of Scripture to defend their theological conclusions. Thus, in this regard, it is not a human authority that advocates a particular belief they hold, but Scripture, and ultimately, God himself. So then, how do exegetical fallacies play into the mix of discerning the right interpretations from the wrong interpretations?

Well, the objective of exegetical fallacies is to reveal false methods, and thus false evidence, when seeking to uncover the meaning of a passage of Scripture. The way that an interpreter views and draws conclusions from valid evidence is a completely different stage in the interpretive process. Whole books have been dedicated to this topic and there are multiple schools of thought about how to achieve synthesis of the evidence and discover meaning. Exegesis concern only the methods used to acquire evidence about a text, not the manner in which that evidence is compiled, weighed, and synthesized to formulate interpretive conclusions and, in the end, doctrinal beliefs. This is role of hermeneutics in the interpretive process.

Whatever convoluted debate can surround the interpretations we hear (or have heard) from a variety of sources, critical exegesis is only concerned with discovering “WHAT does the Word say?” and “WHY do I claim that a certain position should be viewed as the one Scripture affirms.” In order to not be ignorant of

false methods of investigation and bias toward preferred beliefs, it is necessary to undergo self-examination of our exegetical practices so that we may expose in our approach improper logic/reasoning, flawed inferences, and mistaken deductions that cause our interpretive process to be defective, yielding inaccurate evidence, and thus, inaccurate conclusions.

We all claim to believe the Bible. But what we often fail to do is subject ourselves to accepting what it actually says. In order to be able to do that, we must first be capable of knowing how to hear its voice and not our own. Part of that ability involves being aware of the wrong ways we fail to hear the voice of Scripture.

## II. A WORD OF CAUTION

The purpose of studying exegetical fallacies is not to point to every misstep an interpreter might take. It is not for us to find everything that's wrong and belabor cynical outlooks that result in negativism toward biblical interpretation. It is to point us in the right direction, to help us see clearer, to remove our personal opinions, and to provide a valid basis for justifying our conclusions about the meaning of the text.

Concentrating too intently on the possible fallacies in exegesis can produce an unsettled disposition toward biblical interpretation because identifying so many exegetical pitfalls can leave one feeling disconcerted toward the whole interpretative process. Such disconcerting thoughts could easily lead one to feel discouraged about even attempting to interpret Scripture. In the course of becoming more acquainted with the challenges involved in biblical interpretation, some people feel the Bible becomes a book that increasingly drifts away from them. They find their "simple" faith and their "simple" approach to Scripture are no longer simple because they are forced to wrestle with ideas and concepts that call into question the very fabric of their belief system about Scripture.

This often results in people shrinking back from grappling with the real complexities surrounding biblical interpretation and retreating into a form of defensive complacency, or worse yet, denial altogether. They will deny the need to critically investigate Scripture, deny the legitimacy of any counter-evidence to their own position, and deny the need to be any more intellectual about biblical studies than one needs to be in order to arrive at the conclusions they have adhered to for so long. This is due to the fact that encountering the real text of the Bible and seeing it with untainted eyes carries with it an inherent risk that a person may find their current understanding to be wrong and they are forced to engage in the psychological process of assimilation—they must now take new information and knowledge they have acquired and blend it with the rest of their awareness, understanding, and preexisting beliefs. Sometimes this produces rifts in a person's psychological construct that they are not prepared to handle, causing them to feel the need in their conscience to readdress their self-identity in an uncomfortable way, and then possibly to become burdened with the need for their entire belief system to be redefined. This makes people feel vulnerable and insecure because they realize part of their former belief construct and worldview was false and they now have to overcome the fear of changing what they affirm to be the truth (i.e., reality).

As Carson explains, "The fundamental danger with all critical study of the Bible lies in what hermeneutical experts call *distanciation*."<sup>4</sup> Distanciation is the act of distancing oneself from one's own presuppositions in the interpretive process and then engaging in evaluating critical evidence for discerning the meaning of the text. Distanciation is not an end in itself, but a means whereby one can proceed with greater liberty to hear the voice of Scripture. On the other hand, the omission of distanciation results in the interpreter using their personal convictions and beliefs (*a priori* knowledge) as

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 14. (emphasis mine)

not only an essential component in their interpretive process, but a self-limiting one as well.

Coming to the text with prior knowledge is not inherently bad. Every person possesses an accumulation of knowledge that they come to the text with, but such prior knowledge will distort the interpretive process and interfere with the voice of Scripture if used as a pretext in determining possible meaning. Whenever we try to place our interpretation of Scripture within our *a priori* framework and use it as a shortcut to discovering the meaning of the text, we fail to achieve proper distancing as biblical interpreters and we will likely arrive at a “private” interpretation that agrees with our current understanding.

The interpretive process is one that requires a person to know themselves and where they stand, to perceive where Scripture stands, and then to merge the two together, letting the voice of Scripture reform and govern their understanding and beliefs. Incorporating the meaning of Scripture into our current understanding may mean we rewrite what we thought we knew. As Carson aptly describes about this process:

*“Whenever we try to understand the thought of a text (or of another person, for that matter), if we are to understand it critically—that is, not in some arbitrary fashion, but with sound reasons, and as the author meant it in the first place—we must first of all grasp the nature and degree of the differences that separate our understanding from the understanding of the text. Only then can we profitably fuse our horizon of understanding with the horizon of understanding of the text—that is, only then can we begin to shape our thoughts by the thoughts of the text so that we truly understand them. Failure to go through the distancing before the fusion usually means there has been no real fusion: the interpreter thinks he knows what the text*

*means, but all too often he or she has simply imposed his own thoughts onto the text.”*<sup>5</sup>

Whatever hesitation a person may have toward this manner of interpretive process, encouraging the use of critical thinking will doubtfully reduce a person’s faith. It may alter it (causing a person to change their beliefs), but it will not weaken it (diminishing a person’s resolve).<sup>6</sup> With greater understanding comes greater conviction. A person may not end up with the same formulated beliefs at the end of the process as when they first began; however, protecting one’s way of thinking and current beliefs is at cross-purposes with critical exegesis and the interpretive process that follows in search of an accurate understanding of Scripture.

At the end of the journey, if the interpretive process has caused you to evaluate evidence from Scripture, to consider what that evidence means, and to discern the meaning of the text from that evidence, you will find it a most noble endeavor by which you stand *beneath* the voice of Scripture rather than *over* top of it. The objective of learning wrong Bible study methods is to avoid attributing your own voice to what Scripture is saying and to allow it to speak for itself.

### III. LIMITATIONS

This study is by no means comprehensive in scope or the absolute authority on the subject. It will not be a highly technical or academic discussion of the material. It simply aims to introduce and discuss the most common forms of the incorrect practices that can occur during exegesis. Some forms are more common than others, but they are all significant and able to be avoided if the interpreter is aware of their falsity. In most cases, examples of each fallacy are provided along with some

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>6</sup> “Provided that part of the task of interpretation is nurtured along with distancing, distancing will not prove destructive.” Ibid.

rationale for how interpreters might find themselves caught in the trap of that particular fallacy. As the design of this study is to expose wrong practices of exegesis, it is not directed at redressing every wrong method of exegesis. But where a valid method or premise can be put forth and offered in response to show how to correct the error committed in the fallacy, such effort is given to include it (but in brief detail, as such methods are not the focus of this study).

Also, when the interpretive process is spoken of, it is commonly assumed that the exegetical process and hermeneutical process are both in view. Whereas the former deals with the process of uncovering the meaning of the sacred text of Scripture, the latter deals with the nature of the interpretive process as a whole and how the meaning of the text translates into a coherent theological system of understanding, and then ultimately, its meaning in our lives. Hermeneutics draws on exegesis, but exegesis does not draw on hermeneutics. As mentioned before, exegetical fallacies address the exegetical portion of the interpretive process and intentionally refrain from venturing into the realm of hermeneutics.

Thus, as the title of this article indicates, what we are interested in is understanding some of the common false methods (i.e., exegetical fallacies) that are sometimes wrongly used in the interpretive process when attempting to draw out and understand the meaning of the text. And so, in subsequent articles, we will look at what are some of these wrong practices we might commit when determining what the Bible means and why they are incorrect ways to arrive at truth.

#### IV. REFERENCES

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