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Imagination of the World of Scripture**

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Abstract: This paper is about a method of exegesis, an exegetical procedure. It addresses the issue of reading the text in a way that respects and takes seriously all three traditional foci of interpretation, the author, the text, and the reader in one holistic approach to interpreting the text. Thus, the core issue is the focus of exegesis of the text (Is it the world of the reader or of the author?) and the locus of meaning (Is it in the text or in the mind of the reader?). Exegesis should focus on the life-story of the text (or passage of Scripture) as the primary context. The life-story is the reconstructed story behind and revealed in the passage. The life-story provides the common ground for the author, text, and reader to interact in a holistic way in the work of the exegete. Underlying this method is the assumption that the passage represents and reveals the world of the ancient community of faith, which can be imaged in such a way that the modern reader can participate in it and interact with author and community in a meaningful way. This interaction allows the exegete not only to discern the meaning of the text for the ancient community, but also to find the patterns of application for the ancient community and for the church today.

Key Words: exegesis, life-story, imagination, historical-grammatical, deep structure, transformation

“Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked.

“Yes,” they replied.

He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”

Matthew 13:51,52 NIV

Introduction

Exegesis by story is about exegesis, opening the Bible and interpreting a passage of Scripture. When Jesus had finished his discourse on parables (Matt. 13), he gave his disciples the “great commission” for the scribes of the Kingdom (that is, the exegete, the “teacher of the Law”). He admonished them that their task was to bring

the Scripture to the Kingdom community in such a way that the old (The Bible) was brought to newness (understanding and relevance for the community). This is, or should be, exegesis. Exegesis by story is a better way to do this.

The title of the article, *Exegesis by Story: the disciplined imagination of the world of Scripture*, functions as a table of contents for this treatise. The article is about *exegesis*. By this is meant the study of a passage of Scripture to draw out its meaning in preparation for teaching or preaching. Be advised that references to “text” and “passage” usually refer to a particular passage of Scripture (like Matthew 13:51,52) which the “scribe” focuses on as he does his work. This article deals with how to approach and interpret such a passage of Scripture. *By Story* suggests a method for exegesis, a way to approach the text which will hopefully produce good results in understanding the old and bringing it to the new. *Imagination* refers to the procedure the exegete follows to access the Story. *Disciplined* describes the technique used to find the Story and to bring it to written expression in a faithful way. *The world of Scripture* is the Bible (each and every one of its books and passages), given as God’s Word and guide to life for the ancient and modern community of faith. Exegesis by Story then is the task of Kingdom scribes.

Hermeneutics, especially exegesis, is a complex issue for the church today. Scholars have identified and been working on a key problem, the focus of exegesis¹. Is the main focus the intention of the author and the understanding of the original audience? Is it the text, as the obvious bearer of the message to the church? Or is it the reader, who must in the end be the one to formulate the meaning of the text? Exegesis by Story seeks to explain how these three aspects of the task of exegesis work together in a holistic way. In reality, the church has been doing exegesis adequately for centuries. But insights into language, literature, and the nature of history in the 20th and 21st century from the social sciences and hermeneutical studies call for observations about biblical interpretation which need to be brought out of the treasure chest.

Exegesis

Biblical exegesis is the process of reading the Bible in order to interpret or explain the meaning of the biblical text in a careful and detailed way. Since exegesis is at the

1. W. Randolph Tate devotes his whole book to it. *Biblical Interpretation: an integrated approach*, Peabody Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991. He calls it a “journey into three worlds” (xv) and calls these worlds the “author-centered approaches to meaning,” the “text-centered approaches to meaning,” and the “reader-centered approaches to meaning” (xvi-xix). Grant Osborne notes the same issue in, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, revised and expanded (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 516. See also Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, Grant Lovejoy, eds., *Biblical Hermeneutics: a comprehensive introduction to interpreting Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 5-13, in the section “A Student’s Primer for Exegesis” Corley discusses at length the task of integrating the three foci, author, text and reader in finding the meaning of Scripture.

very core of hermeneutics, the description and definition of this process has attracted much attention among philosophers, theologians and biblical scholars. However it is evident that the precise nature and a commonly agreed-upon procedure of exegesis continues to allude the academic community.

The approaches to exegesis vary depending on the focus of the interpreter and the assumption about the locus of meaning. Tate highlighted the three main “groups of theories” that effect the definition and method of exegesis—author-centered, text-centered, and reader-centered². He notes that these three centers (or foci) for interpretation are “usually viewed as mutually exclusive” when it comes to the search for the meaning of the text³. In his book, Tate seeks an integrated approach between these three—“Hermeneutics is a dialogue between the text and reader, and the text and reader enter into a conversational covenant informed by the world of the author.”⁴ His approach to integration puts special emphasis on the interaction between text and reader⁵. Osborne continues the same discussion of the problems concerning these three foci (author, text, and reader) in the process of discovering the meaning of a text⁶. He challenges us with urgent questions--

Which of the three [foci] is the primary force in determining [a text’s] meaning? The focus has shifted from one to another of these as various theories of meaning have been propounded. Since an author is no longer present to explain the meaning of the text once it is written, is the text autonomous from the author? And since the reader provides the grid by which the text is interpreted, what place does the text itself have in the process of understanding?

Osborne affirms that the author, text, and reader “are not contradictory but are interdependent parts of a larger whole.”⁷ He affirms the priority of authorial intent and suggests that integration of the various approaches takes place mainly in interaction between text (as prior) and reader guided closely by the world of the author/recipients “as a control on the way we apply biblical language to current issues.”⁸ Both these scholars (and many others) are looking for a way to provide a wholistic approach to the text that takes into account the dynamics found in these three essential elements of author, text, and reader.

This paper is about a method of exegesis, an exegetical procedure. It is the “how” question. How can the church read the text in a way that respects and takes seriously

2. Tate, xvi.

3. Ibid.

4. Tate, 210.

5. Tate, 210-212, see this discussion.

6. Osborne, in Appendix 1 The Problem of Meaning, 465.

7. Osborne, 516.

8. Osborne, quoting R.T. France in his 1984 article “The Church and the Kingdom of God: some hermeneutical issues,” 521.

the whole context, the author and recipients, the text, and itself as the readers. Thus, the core issue is the focus of exegesis of the text (Is it the world of the reader or of the author?) and the locus of meaning (Is it in the text or in the mind of the reader?). Does the exegete take his signals from the ancient world (as the primary context), or some other context? How does he make the decision what the text means? A related concern will be the question of significance or application, a natural and expected outcome of exegesis. Can one bypass the historical/literal meaning and go straight to the various theological or ecclesiastical contexts to apply the text? Or should the sermon be set mostly in the zipcode of ancient Jerusalem, leaving the application of the Word to the individual believer?

To begin to answer some of these questions, a clue from the early church's own exegetical method should be observed, because it appears that the leaders of the early church practiced exegesis by story. The term "exegesis" comes from a Greek concept. The Greeks spoke about the importance of interpreting and explaining the law, or delivering the oracle of a god, or expounding on the meaning of a sacred text. The word used was ἐξηγέομαι (exegeomai) or ἐξήγησις (exegesis) (from ἐξηγέομαι, *interpret, explain, tell, report, describe*⁹). The use of the word in the New Testament however usually carries a different but related sense—to narrate or report¹⁰. Only the verb form is found in the New Testament, used mostly in contexts that speak about the narration or report of a series of events. In four instances, different individuals or groups (the disciples from Emmaus, Paul and Barnabas, Simon, or Paul alone) are relating a series of events (telling their story) to the disciples gathered. In these instances, the narration of the story is given to explain or interpret (exegeomai) the meaning of the circumstances they are in. (Read the passages containing Luke 24:35, Acts 15:12,14, and Acts 21:19). The other two instances (John 1:18 and Acts 10:8) are the use of the verb to mean "reveal" or "explain". Etymologies and word studies in themselves seldom prove a definitive, final meaning for a word, but the story in Acts (read in Greek) clearly shows that the early church saw the value of knowing the larger story in order to understand the significance of their particular circumstances and the pathway to proper decision-making. In the New Testament, "exegesis" was a technique of explaining something by telling the whole story around it.

This technique provides a promising approach to understanding the biblical text. The elements of historical-grammatical studies (traditional exegesis) are still required, but there is one important step to be taken before the exegesis of a passage can be complete--finding the story behind the text. As the title of the article suggests, the story behind the biblical text will provide a more comprehensive and holistic

9. Kittel, Friedrich, Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, abridged in one volume*, trans and ed. Bromiley, s.v. ἡγέομαι.

10. Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, 1979, s.v. ἐξηγέομαι, ἐξήγησις.

context for exegeting a passage. The role of story in exegesis in explaining texts has great promise.

What is the story of the text, and in what sense is story an essential element in exegeting a text?

Story

It has been affirmed that the *story* behind the text provides the appropriate context for interpretation. What is story as the exegetical focus? How is this focus distinguished from the traditional foci of author/text/reader? In what way does the story carry the meaning of the Scripture to the reader?

In practice, of necessity when a person comes to a passage of Scripture to exegete, she first focuses on the text. The exegetical procedure (however complex or simple) then directs the exegete through the text to some understanding of meaning in the text or in the effect the text makes upon her. The text is at the center of the process. However, as mentioned above, in order to find a wholistic approach to the passage it is necessary to take an intermediate step after carefully examining the text and before starting to draw out the meaning (exegeting). One must first *reconstruct the story revealed by the text, the story of which the text is a part as an event*. Everything has a history, a story behind it. This is true of a biblical book or part of a book. The passage of Scripture is part of the larger story of the writing of the book (in most genres, but the Psalms might be an exception¹¹). The passage is in reality part of the larger story of the author's or editor's life especially in his relationship to the recipients (however close or remote that relationship may be). To understand the passage, the exegete must first find the story behind it. The locus of meaning is in the narrative behind the text. One finds the meaning by imaginatively entering that story. One enters that story by carefully applying the traditional steps and tools of exegesis to reconstruct the story. With the story, then, the exegesis of the passage can begin.

Can it be said that the text has a history and thus reveals its own story? In this sense, yes. The text of Scripture does not simply create a world in the literary sense, but rather the text arises from the ongoing life of the author and recipients, the ongoing activities of the author and recipients in the original context of their world. The text has a history, a life-story it should be called. In traditional, historical-grammatical exegesis the steps guide the exegete to find the *background* of the text, the world from which the text arises. However, is this background merely supplementary to the text, as a way to understand more clearly the concepts expressed by the text? In reality, this background material is the *foreground*, the focus of the search for meaning. The exegete should be looking more deeply in the passage for the world and life-story of the text. One needs to reconstruct and focus on a narrative which describes

11. In the case of a psalm, each psalm contains its own life-story, although its story is related to the larger story of the compilation of the psalms.

the flow of events which provoked the production of the book. The exegete should look for how the author and community struggled with circumstances or issues as revealed by the passage, how the author represented and dealt with these matters, and what was going on when the text was being read for the first time by the original intended audience, and for other important features, as will be seen. The historical/social background, the story behind the text, is actually the *primary* context of the text, not supplementary. The cultural concepts and events behind the text, what is usually called “background” and used to illumine the ideas of the text, is actually the foreground. The world we are looking for in a biblical book is the underlying story of the writing of the book, the underlying flow of circumstances that led the author to say what he did and the recipients to understand it the way they should. This reconstructed story reveals the history of the text, and particularly the events going on as the text is being written and read.

The concept of deep structure guides in understanding the text as story. The text of a passage is the surface structure. As surface structure, it should be seen as arising from the deeper story of the text as told by the text. Thus it is necessary to talk about the deep structure of the biblical text. Osborne’s comments at this point are relevant. In discussing the implications of structuralism on biblical studies, he discusses how the “mythopoetic” understanding of the deep structure of literature guides us to look for the underlying universal categories of thinking (binaries like comedy/tragedy, light/dark) which are found in the text, and which are the true matrix of meaning¹². He also discusses at length the other form of structuralism applied to language studies, the Chomskian idea of generative/ transformational grammar as the deep structure of sentences¹³. In Osborne’s analysis of deep structure, the reality of a broader deep structure underlying the text is made evident. Osborne (citing Thiselton) comes to an interesting insight. He refers to “biblical” deep structure.

As Thiselton states, there is a very real danger in placing the cognitive element [Chomsky’s transformational grammar] above *the emotive, cultural, or religious deep structures that also underlie a surface statement*. Indeed, deep structure properly considered certainly goes beyond the categories Chomsky [or Levi Strauss, *author’s addition*] elucidated. For biblical study it demands a recognition of the many areas of nonlinguistic realities behind the actual statements of the passage.”¹⁴

It reflects more the reality of the text to realize that the deep structure (or substructure if you will) is not only mythopoetic and/or grammatical. It is the *historical* deep structure, the deep structure story/history of the text which best reveals its meaning.

12. Osborne, 471ff.

13. Osborne, 140ff.

14. Osborne, 143. See Anthony Thiselton, “Language and meaning in religion,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*.

The text is the literary surface structure which reveals the deep structure story of the text. It is this deep structure story which must be reconstructed and made the focus of exegesis.

So what is the exegete looking for in the text? How does the text bear meaning? The text arises from and is an integral part of a broader story. The primary context of a text is not the surrounding literary text, not the historical/social conditions which are background of the text, not the needs and issues of the modern reader. The primary context is the series of events and interactions involving the author/recipients/faith community going on at the time of the writing—the deep structure story. The text is one event in that story. If the text is an event in the life of that ancient community, it can be reconstructed as a story, the life-story of the text. This reconstructed story describes what is going on at the time of the writing and reading of the original author/recipients, what the subjects are doing, what they are saying to one another, how they react (or should react) to what is being said, even what God is doing at the time and through the situation. If the exegete is willing to see the text not as an object to use in some way, but rather as the interaction between two subjects, the author and recipients (really, three, because God is always involved), he can see himself as a subject interacting with the author just as the original recipients interacted. The more he is part of that story as subject, the better he understands the text being studied.

Imagination

What is the methodology for finding and entering the life-story of the text? How does the exegete become a recipient just as the original audience was? The word imagination is used, but a better designation would be imaging. One enters this story by picturing and describing the story that is there. This methodology has promise. L.T. Johnson, in his article *Imagining the world Scripture imagines*¹⁵, offers such a methodology. (At this point it should be stated that Johnson is proposing a method for bringing the *theological ideas* of the text to the community of faith today in a way that will allow more vital understanding and application. He is not speaking about the life-story of the text but the world of ideas (the worldview) of the Scripture.) He says that the focus of theology as it speaks to the church today cannot be the dissected Scriptures of historical/grammatical studies (“sterile literalism”¹⁶) nor even the propositions of biblical theology, both of which have distanced us from the conceptual world imaged by Scripture. Johnson contends that theologians need to discern and recover the world imaged in Scripture in such a way that it is possible to see clearly how to live in it today. This theological world is like a city, in which not only the ancient community dwelt but also in which the community of faith continues

15. Luke Timothy Johnson, “Imagining the World Scripture Imagines,” (*Modern Theology*, April, 1998): 165-180.

16. Johnson, 170.

to live today¹⁷. Theologians today must recover a way of relating Scripture to the 21st century world by imaging the world of ideas which Scripture brought into being. This image, this map of the life and beliefs of the ancient community, becomes the guide so the church can live in it and be transformed by it. Thus the methodology is a process of studying Scripture in order to bring into clear focus (image) the world which Scripture depicts and through that to help congregations see how to live out those ideas.

As stated above, to understand this process, Johnson contends it is necessary to think of the theological world of the Scripture as a city which has a past and present. In such a city (one's hometown, for instance), the past lives along with the present. The present residents live in many ways in the same world as their ancestors—parents, grandparents, great grandparents. Johnson holds that there is a continuity of existence of life and living that informs the present residents through and literally in the life and structures created by the past residents¹⁸. Thus Johnson proposes bringing the theological worldview of the ancient community of faith to the present by imagining the biblical world. The assumption behind this is that theology is active properly only in a living, breathing community, and the Scriptures of the ancient community of faith did indeed create such a world in which the church today could live and move and have their being. Thus the present generation finds the real pertinence of Scripture by discovering again and living in that world. In his article, Johnson has begun to explore the possibilities of recreating the world found in Scripture as a way for the church today to access it.

In exegesis by story, the concern is with Johnson's *methodology* not his content (theology). For *exegetical* purposes, imaging is a way to make the world of the text available so the community of faith can live in it, learn from it, be molded by it. The world behind the text is not just the worldview of the theological ideas, but the actual historical setting and life of the author and recipients. *Imaging thus becomes the method for accessing the world of the author/recipients in order to live in it.* This method requires a search not just for ideas in the text to put down on paper (propositions) but it must picture and recreate in narrative form the world in which those ideas were alive and active. This narrative will depict the people involved in the writing of the biblical book and how they interacted with one another, the series of events that transpired and produced the writing, the social circumstances and their dynamics that were part of the methods and concerns of the writer and recipients, the important theological, philosophical, ideological factors that molded and guided the thinking, the patterns of activity which the author refers to and of which the ancient community was a part. This narrative must even take into account the geography and weather events in and behind the written text. The present reader can perhaps think of other significant features that would be part of the story of the text.

17. Johnson, 167, 168. He calls it a living city, one that has continuous existence.

18. Johnson, 168.

This methodology for exegesis implies two things. At the core of the exegetical process is the discovery and imaging of the deep structure of the biblical text. The process is called transformation. It is the process of transformation from the surface text to the deep structure world. It is more than simply a grammatical transformation, or simply a narrative structural analysis¹⁹. The exegete is not simply looking for the archetypal substructures, the subconscious codes²⁰ that are foundational to human thinking. All of these are *aspects* of the substructure world of the text in some way or other. This approach to exegesis assumes that the transformative substructure of the text is a history, a story of human interaction within the larger story of the faith community and within the larger natural, social, and spiritual world of the author and recipients. It is this story that underlies and produces the text; it is the transformative grammar of life that gives shape (and meaning) to the text. In the case of exegesis, the concern is to start with the text and work to the substructure story, a sort of reverse transformation if you will.

Secondly, perhaps the most significant reality of the substructure story being imaged is that the community of faith today is part of the same story. The past city of the biblical world is continuous with the city the church lives in today. Thus there is an essential and substantial continuity of life with the original author and recipients²¹. Johnson's point is that the present community *can* live in the ancient world through imagination, and in this existence can discover the living power of the ancient community's theological worldview and how it can and should become theirs. This author would add that discovering the theological world is not the only thing needed. Even more, it is necessary to discover how the ancient community lived in their cities, addressed their problems, related to one another, dealt with social pressure, and perhaps most importantly understood and related to God. When one enters this world he will be able to see patterns of activity (natural, social, and spiritual) that are recognized as still active in the world. The early church fathers discovered these patterns relevant for their own generations, patterns of salvation and spiritual transformation, patterns of relating to God. But the patterns of activity seen behind the biblical text involved much more than just the spiritual or theological. There are patterns of government (like the monarchy), patterns of social interaction (like the hellenistic household), patterns of nature (like the rain cycle), even patterns of tradition and biblical interpretation (like Paul's use of midrash), which can and

19. Such as is laid out in Jean Calloud, *Structural Analysis of Narrative*, trans. Daniel Patte (Fortress Press, 1976).

20. Osborne, 471.

21. Johnson, 167. "In a living city, the past is not someplace else, but this place; the city's past continues as part of its present. The past is not memorialized but incorporated. The city's history is not external to its inhabitants, but is part of their own story; indeed, their story cannot be told without telling the story of the city...In this city there is constant change, yet the change is contained within a deeper continuity, as this city remains, undeniably and indefinitely, this and only this city." In other words, the world of Scripture is the same "city" the church lives in today.

should also guide in finding the relevance and proper application of the biblical text. This “city” of the biblical world is the same one the community of faith lives in today. Many of the old buildings have been torn down, some of the streets have been rerouted and many have been added, some of the old theatres are still there but mostly new ones with stadium seats have replaced them, but it is the same city in most of the essential and important ways. It is essential that the church find this ancient map as a guide in the modern city.

Discipline

The deep structure story is the focus of our exegetical efforts. It is from this story one determines what the author was saying and doing and how it connected to the world in which he and the recipients lived. This story helps the exegete see more clearly how the recipients received the writing. The vivid image of this world makes the modern reader aware of the broader context of the life-story of the text and thus to see more of the implications of the text—not only what the text is saying, but what the author is doing, how that message was or is intended to be applied and how that application will function in the life of the community of faith. This idea is the dynamic of which Johnson speaks when he proposes that the theology of the Scripture will become more accessible to the community of faith through the imagination of the world of Scripture.

However, the imaging of this world of Scripture is not the work of pure imagination. The dangers of that kind of exegesis are obvious and well documented. The work of imaging the life-story of the text requires discipline, and discipline of a certain kind. Discipline happens (as do all things) in context. Training for the Olympic competition in gymnastics requires a certain kind of discipline. The wrong kind or amount of training will not be adequate. This is perhaps too simple an example, but the point is that imaging the world of Scripture requires discipline, discipline that is determined by the nature of the task and the goals of the exegete. The need to ground meaning in authorial intent still guides the process (the author-centered approach). In fact, all the commonly accepted rules of historical-grammatical study are to be applied. The result however is not an outline and summary of teaching, but a full account of the world of the text. What kind of discipline is required? What qualifications, limitations, and guidelines should be applied to the process of imaging?

First, a thorough historical-grammatical analysis of the text of Scripture must be done. These steps are clearly and helpfully laid out in such manuals as Gordon Fee’s *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*.²² Osborne lists as the basic tasks of exegetical effort investigation of the context (historical, logical, and compositional), establishing the text (textual criticism), grammatical analysis (analysis of individual words or grammatical units), semantic investigation

22. Third edition, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

(word studies, syntagmatic and paradigmatic use and meaning of the words, even investigation of deep structure), and investigation of the syntax in the broader sense (finding the flow of thought of the whole discourse, identifying kernel statements, finding the illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of the text)²³. The process of imagination, or reconstruction of the world of Scripture, must be guided at every point by the thorough exegesis of the text, the text itself being the anchor point for imagination and understanding, or exegesis.

But exegesis must go one step further after the historical-grammatical investigation is done. From the light which the carefully exegeted text sheds on what the author and recipients are doing in the text, the full story must be reconstructed. The final step in the traditional exegetical process should be the reconstruction of the life-story from the surface structure. One compelling reason for this reconstruction arises because the surface text leaves much unsaid that is properly there. Tate stresses the gaps which exist in a written text, especially an ancient text in a different language from a different culture.²⁴ The original author and recipients shared a common pool of knowledge which was necessary for clear understanding but much of which is not immediately available and obvious to the modern reader. This pool of knowledge includes knowledge of language, culture, past experience between the author and recipients, circumstances attendant upon the events described (in a narrative) or the issues ongoing (in an epistle). Through the historical-grammatical work, these gaps in knowledge can be filled in to a great extent. A fuller, clearer story of the world and narrative behind the text can then be reconstructed. On the other hand, lack of careful historical-grammatical investigation will result in filling in the gaps from our own language, culture, and experiences, that is, from our own imaginations. Thus much of the depth and fulness and of the true relevance of the ancient text is lost to the modern reader.

The World Of Scripture

The question now is, “How does this world, this context, guide us in understanding the Scripture?” It has been asserted that the world of Scripture is the substructure story from which the biblical writings arise and that which constitutes their most important and essential context for understanding. “Dwelling” in this world²⁵ provided the ancient community of faith the proper perspective for receiving and using the texts. For the community of faith today, leaving their own world to dwell in the world of Scripture and read the texts in that context provides the same advantage. What

23. Osborne, 30-33. In these pages Osborne summarizes the steps to exegesis that are addressed in his book.

24. Tate, 152-159. Tate cites Wolfgang Iser’s concept of “gaps of indeterminacy” which the reader of the text must bridge in order to find the meaning by filling in the gaps.

25. As L.T. Johnson words it, 173.

is the advantage of exegeting the text in the context of the life-story of the ancient community?

The first advantage of exegeting by story is the *holistic* context of understanding it provides. It is a *whole* world which appears for the exegete, a world in which he can participate more fully because it is presented in clarity and fullness. The life-story reveals the whole process behind the authors' statements. All the dynamics of the text (literary, theological, sociological, spiritual, natural) can be seen flowing together providing a coherent picture. The old axiom (simply stated) is true— we understand the whole by the parts, we understand the parts by the whole. It is the hermeneutical circle (or spiral as Osborne would insist). If this is true, then the clearer and more complete the picture of the context of the text, the better the reader understands each part. The details in the text (words, sentences, discourse, background) reveal a larger story, and this life-story of the text allows the exegete to understand the parts much better. The holistic context allows for greater clarity of each part of the text, each idea, each syntactical connection, each social or cultural allusion.

For the modern reader, the second advantage is contemporaneity, of being able to read and understand the text in the spirit of the times. But it is not primarily contemporaneity with the world of the modern reader but with the world and spirit of the original audience. Thus, dwelling in the world of Scripture allows a significant measure of synchronicity with the author, recipients and text (despite the diachronic relationship the exegete has to the text) and provides a perspective on the text that is much closer and truer to the original intended impact. Contemporaneity is a powerful force (for good or bad) in the process of understanding. Readers of Scripture too often want to sense the relevance of the text to their own thoughts, issues or life situation, thus missing much of its meaning and intent for the community of faith. Dwelling in the world of the text through the life-story enables the reader to allow the apostle (or prophet or psalmist) to speak to the community of faith (in any age) in the way its author intended.

The need for contemporaneity and relevance is especially important to the reader of Scripture. It is the Canon, the guide for faith and living adopted by the ancient community of faith and faithfully passed down as such. It is the Word of Life. The Scripture needs to “work” in the life of the community of faith of which the reader(s) is a part. It cannot be read like the morning newspaper, however, because the primary context of its meaning and power is the biblical story, not the story of our day. So in what way is the world of Scripture a better context for interpretation than the 21st century?

This leads to the question of application, or significance as some would call it. This is the third advantage of this holistic approach. Application is almost universally acknowledged to be the ultimate goal of exegesis or hermeneutics. The church must make the Bible relevant for today. When exegeting the text through the substructure life-story a world opens up which reveals amazing details of application. The exegeted

text and the reconstructed life-story show how the ancient audience applied the text, or were expected to apply it. It shows what cultural, political, social life situations the text bore meaning for. It reveals who was supposed to find the significance of the message and what role such persons would play in applying the text. It clearly reveals what the author was trying to *do*, and therefore what effect the message was expected to have on readers. It exposes the important theological ideas and traditions the author and readers were committed to and operating by, and also shows how the author was applying his theology and tradition (the OT for the NT author) to the issues of the community of faith. In other words, not only the theological ideas but the method of applying those theological ideas to life situations. The reconstructed text reveals trans-cultural patterns of activity that can be easily perceived and understood by the modern reader. A simple example of such a pattern would be the storm in which Paul and his traveling companions were caught out in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea on the way to Rome. The reader can sense much more fully the impact of this storm if one is dwelling in that world and allowing oneself to be taken up in the weather patterns. There are, however, many patterns of life operating in the life-story of the text, social patterns of interaction (as in a house church), political dynamics in operation (as in the turmoil behind the Revelation), spiritual dynamics and patterns operating in the spirit of the individual (as in a psalm). These are the same patterns of life and nature which are operating today, so the modern reader can enter into the ancient world with greater understanding. The story will show how the community of faith perceived God working among them and how they clearly identified and responded to him. In the end, exegesis by story becomes application, or brings application into the process of exegesis. Exegesis now directly flows into the life and understanding of the modern reader bringing the application of the dynamic flow of life found in the ancient faith community as seen in the world of the text into the life of the community of faith today.

Conclusion

Exegesis by story focuses on a biblical passage by reconstructing the life-story of the text and exploring the whole story of and behind the text. Interpreting the text with this life story as the immediate context allows the exegete to discern more clearly the dynamic of the text, not just the flow of ideas but *the living interaction between the author and his audience. It is through this living interaction that the modern reader finds an entrance into the meaning of the text.* The world of the text beckons the reader to imagine living in this world as her own.

Thus, the question of priority (is it the text, the author, or the reader?) can be seen in a new perspective. Exegesis by story allows all three aspects of biblical interpretation to find common ground on which to interact equally. The debate no longer has to exclude one or the other of these elements to find some sort of resolution

to the exegetical problem mentioned above. To put it another way, the exegete no longer has to take sides for theology, or history, or literature to the exclusion of the others in interpreting the text. This trichotomous tension is not the way the text works. *The text as literature captures and expresses the story of the life of the ancient community in which the reader in any age can participate meaningfully.*

How does this happen? By living (or “dwelling”) in the story. How can the exegete do this? She must start with the text. Of necessity, the text is the primary focus of the exegete. It is simply the way the word of God has been presented, through language, through text. The exegete then reconstructs the story, using good exegetical techniques, to reveal the life story in and under the text. Then, on the assumption that there is indeed a significant level of continuity of life between the ancient community of faith and the church today (not a totally agreed upon thing), the life-story of the ancient community contained in the text provides the opportunity for the reader through imagination to cross her own horizon into the world of meaning and interaction which was reality for the ancient community. In this “dwelling,” the text brings the reader and the author/original audience together into a mutual interaction with one another. The assumption here is that the ancient text is not a thing or object, it is the still- living voice of a person, the author and his audience. In dealing with the text, the exegete is dealing with a subject with whom to interact, not an object that she can use for her own purposes. Finally, the exegete can begin to explore the world of the text. If one knows the whole story and can see clearly the world of the ancient community, one can listen and observe what is going on in the text and, in faith (just as the ancient community did), respond to the urging of the inspired author to live faithfully to the presence of God in the community. One knows what questions to ask and what not to ask. Thus, one hears true and meaningful answers. One learns not only what is being said but also how to respond, how to make the choices that should be made, how to integrate the tradition of the community into the issues of life. The assumption here is that the wisdom of the ancient community is equally available to the exegete for decision making, and the patterns of theologizing for the ancient community are a norm for the exegete as well. Careful observation of the world of the text will reveal many more insights. The key to this path to understanding is of course to live in the story. The text then provides common ground for the original and modern audience to meet by creating the opportunity for subject-to-subject interaction in the context of the life and faith of the ancient, originating community.

In the text of Scripture there is a common ground for the ancient author and community and the church today. The common ground they stand upon is the story. By dwelling in the world of the ancient text through the life-story, the modern reader finds herself dwelling in a city she can recognize and respond to in the most appropriate way.