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Preface to the Second Edition

I am grateful to Jim Kinney from Baker Academic for inviting me to prepare a revised edition of this book, and thanks also to Wells Turner for his excellent job in editing the current edition. It is tempting to enlarge the book significantly, but I believe the book has continued to be read because of its brevity. Hence, the purpose of the revision is to update the book where necessary, especially in terms of bibliography. The book has not changed dramatically, for I am still convinced that the substance of what I wrote some twenty years ago is correct. Nevertheless, the entire book has been revised, and there are some significant additions. The original edition presented the diagrams in Greek but not in English, and thus English has been added to enable readers to understand diagramming conventions. I am particularly thankful for the help of my research assistant, Greg Van Court, who helped with the bibliography, the Greek and English diagrams, and other details so that this revised edition would see the light of day.

When this book was first written, I had three sons, but the Lord has since blessed us with a beautiful daughter as well. I am immensely grateful for the gift that my wife, Diane, and our four children (Daniel, Patrick, John, and Anna) have been to me.

Soli Deo gloria
Writing a book makes one very conscious that no book is ever written by one person alone. I am grateful to Scot McKnight for his thoughtful comments on earlier editions of the work. His criticisms were always penetrating and kind. My colleague at Bethel, Robert Stein, read the entire manuscript with his usual care and saved me from many errors. Another colleague, James Brooks, read my chapters on textual criticism and diagramming, providing invaluable advice on each.

Tom Steller, one of my pastors at Bethlehem Baptist Church, has been not only a friend who displays the warmth and gentleness of Christ, but he also taught me how to trace the argument of a passage (see the method described in chap. 6). A special thanks is due to Dan Fuller of Fuller Seminary, for the method used in chapter 6 ultimately comes from him. He also gave me the permission to disseminate it in this book. I have also benefited from his system of diagramming. Dan read the chapters on diagramming and tracing the argument with an eagle eye, thereby detecting many problems; he helped make this book much better than it would have been otherwise. I should say, however, that I have not followed all of his advice, and thus any errors in those chapters should be laid solely at my feet.

It was a joy to work with my editor from Baker, Gary Knapp. He improved the book in countless ways, for which I am grateful. This book also evinces a dependence upon my mentor from Fuller Seminary, Don Hagner. His “New Testament Theology and Exegesis” class influenced me significantly, and the annotated notebook he has
compiled has been consulted again and again. Mark Reasoner, a col-
league at Bethel College, read about half the manuscript, and I have
incorporated some of his insightful suggestions, especially in regard to
bibliographic material. I do want to say, and not just for perfunctory
reasons, that any shortcomings in the book are mine alone. None of
the people mentioned above would agree with everything said in this
book, and yet all of them have made this book better than it would
otherwise be.

My final and most important thanks are extended to my wife,
Diane. She constantly reminds me that biblical scholarship is “a noisy
gong and clanging cymbal” if the church of Christ is not edified. She
and my three boys, Daniel, Patrick, and John, often drew me away
from this book, not by nagging me but by delighting me with their
own joy of life and joy in God. To God be the glory!
Introduction

Since thirteen of the twenty-seven books in the NT are attributed to Paul, a separate book on how to do Pauline exegesis is warranted. Moreover, the importance of Pauline exegesis is evident from the crucial role that Pauline theology has played in the history of the church. It was Pauline theology that had such a major influence on Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Barth. Any contemporary theology that endeavors to be rooted in and faithful to biblical revelation must wrestle hard and long with Pauline exegesis.

One of the issues we must tackle in this book, therefore, is how we move from exegesis to constructing a Pauline theology. Interpreters inevitably move from exegesis to theology, but it is imperative that such theologizing is truly rooted in exegesis. Furthermore, if Paul’s theology is seen to be normative and authoritative for today’s world (as I think it is), then the issue of significance arises. Accordingly, we ask: How should we apply Paul’s theology to our culture today? How do we translate Paul’s word to the twenty-first-century world? We must be ever mindful that the process of exegesis is not complete unless we bridge the gap between the first-century world and the contemporary

world. These questions pose thorny hermeneutical issues that will be examined in a later chapter.

The importance of doing Pauline exegesis is evident from the above comments, but any discussion of Pauline theology and the significance of his word for today is premature. First, we must study the nuts and bolts of Pauline exegesis. Naturally some overlap exists between how we do Pauline exegesis and how we do exegesis in the rest of the NT. For instance, textual criticism operates on the same basic principles in Paul as elsewhere, even though different manuscripts may be superior in Paul than in the Synoptics. Likewise, the basic methodology used in lexical studies is not unique to Paul. The basic principles of textual criticism and word studies will be summarized, and we will consider some specific issues and examples when doing textual criticism and lexical studies in Paul.

One of the distinguishing features of Pauline literature is the difference in genre. Paul did not write Gospels, nor did he write a history of the early church like Acts, nor did he even write an apocalyptic work like Revelation. He wrote letters to specific communities and individuals. Interpreters must take into account the difference in genre when they interpret the Pauline Letters. To interpret letters as we do narrative or apocalyptic literature would be to miss the genius of what is involved in the letters. That Paul wrote letters gives us two more areas to consider: (1) we need to understand what makes epistolary literature distinctive in order to interpret Paul’s Letters accurately; (2) since Paul wrote these letters in history, some comprehension of introductory and historical questions is essential. The more we know about the particular circumstances of a letter, and the history and culture of the time in which Paul wrote the letter, the better we will understand that letter.

Paul’s Letters also differ from narrative in that they contain highly involved syntax and tightly constructed arguments. This is an oversimplification since some parts of the Gospels and Acts (e.g., Luke 1:1–4) are also syntactically complex and contain involved and intricate arguments. Indeed, carefully constructed arguments are especially evident in the speeches found in the Gospels and Acts. Yet all NT scholars recognize that involved syntax and careful argumentation are distinctive features of Pauline literature. For instance, Eph. 1:3–14 is a single sentence in Greek, though the editors of UBS 4 and NA 27 have chosen to break it up, presumably for easier reading. Not only does Paul write long sentences, but his arguments are also sustained and
ongoing, with each chapter building on the previous one. This is not to say that narrative literature has no structure, for it certainly does. Although narrative displays structure that is portrayed primarily by the selection of events and speeches, Paul’s Letters display a more argumentative structure.

Since the Pauline Letters are grammatically involved and logically complex, diagramming and tracing the argument become particularly important in order to unravel his syntax and unfold his argument. There are no easy shortcuts for understanding Paul. The interpreter can grasp the meaning of Paul’s Letters only through patient attention to syntax and disciplined thinking about the argument of the text. Thus we need to spend a chapter on diagramming and another on tracing the argument of Pauline Letters.

Much of what we say about the Pauline Letters will also apply to the other letters of the NT. Nevertheless, the Pauline Letters present unique challenges in distinction from all other epistolary literature in the NT since we have thirteen letters that are ascribed to Paul, and no other writer even comes close to this number. The distinctiveness of interpreting Paul is especially prominent theologically because his theology must be extrapolated from thirteen letters and not just from one or two.

The various topics mentioned above afford the reader some idea of what we must study in order to interpret the Pauline Letters. But these areas of study were not discussed in a logical order. The list below itemizes nine areas of study in the order in which we will investigate them in this book (the list matches the chapter divisions in this book):

- Understanding the Nature of Letters
- Doing Textual Criticism
- Translating and Analyzing the Letter
- Investigating Historical and Introductory Issues
- Diagramming and Conducting a Grammatical Analysis
- Tracing the Argument
- Doing Lexical Studies
- Probing the Theological Context
- Delineating the Significance of Paul’s Letters

The rest of this chapter will set forth certain assumptions about the nature of exegesis and the motivation for exegesis. What is said
below applies to the exegesis of all Scripture, not just the Pauline Letters. I am deeply aware that the hermeneutical issues addressed here cry out for more-detailed discussion and defense than is possible here. Nevertheless, these issues need to be touched on briefly, for exegesis is never done in a vacuum. Indeed, more in-depth analysis is also needed for many of the other issues addressed in this book, particularly those in the last two chapters on Pauline theology and the significance of Paul’s Letters for today. Detailed discussions of these matters, however, would require a book on almost every issue broached, a task that lies beyond the scope of this work if it is to remain a handbook on Pauline exegesis.

Ultimate Goal of Exegesis

I have often wondered why biblical exegesis is not the consuming passion of pastors and students. Why is it, for example, that so many sermons have so little to do with what the biblical text is saying? Undoubtedly there are various reasons for such a state of affairs. I want to focus on only one reason here. Biblical exegesis is often neglected by students and pastors because they consider it to be the special province of biblical scholars, and the debates that biblical scholars engage in are not considered to be relevant to the life of the ordinary person. Some people consider biblical scholars to be specialists who investigate and debate issues that have little to do with practical everyday living. Sadly enough, scholars share some of the blame here, for they have often failed to see or to share the wider implications of their work. They have become specialists. So the ordinary person asks, Why should I learn any more about the labyrinth of NT scholarship than about the latest research on astronomy? Reading the latest theories in astronomy may be intellectually stimulating, but it is deemed to be practically useless. So too students often relegate biblical exegesis to the scholarly shelf and abandon it as soon as they complete their academic course work.

Too often evangelicals have responded to the world of scholarship with an anti-intellectual attitude. Recognizing the glaring deficiencies of critical scholarship, evangelicals have sometimes responded by denying the need for critical and searching study of the Bible.2 In

2. The word “critical” does not mean that the reader stands in judgment over the Bible. It means that the reader’s understanding of Scripture is based on informed and
place of serious study, some segments of the evangelical subculture have trumpeted a somewhat naive and simplistic way of understanding Scripture. Long ago Erasmus revealed the error of such a mind-set with this penetrating remark: “People say to me, How can scholarly knowledge facilitate the understanding of Holy Scripture? My answer is, How does ignorance contribute to it?”

But how can we convince students that studying Scripture is not merely for the purpose of attaining excellence in a specialized discipline? Of course we need specialists who intensively study a particular subject, but the goal of exegesis is not to gain specialized knowledge in a particular field of study. The goal of exegesis is to gain a worldview based on and informed by the biblical text. Ultimately we all conduct our lives based on our worldview, our perception of life as a whole. Biblical exegesis should be the foundation in the building of that worldview. The complete building is ultimately expressed in our systematic theology, for systematic theology is another way to speak of one’s worldview. Someone has rightly said that every Christian has a systematic theology. The question is this: Is the systematic theology faithful to the biblical text and logically rigorous, or is it contrary to the biblical text and logically in disarray?

One of the problems in the contemporary world is that many biblical scholars do not believe that it is possible to derive a coherent worldview or systematic theology from the biblical text. In so doing, however, such scholars are seemingly undermining the very enterprise in which they are engaged. A few intellectuals will always want to make intelligent judgments. All people make judgments regarding the meaning of the biblical text. The question is whether those judgments are intelligent, plausible, and cogent.


4. For a very helpful discussion of the possibility and importance of systematic theology in exegesis, see D. A. Carson, “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament:
continue the tradition of biblical scholarship, but the ordinary person will soon recognize that biblical exegesis is not vital for the formation of a worldview in the twenty-first century if the documents do not communicate a coherent message. No one can base a life on documents that are inconsistent in their message. Biblical theologians often warn of the dangers of a systematic theology not based on the text but on the pernicious practice of lifting verses out of context, and they are correct in doing so since all systematic theology should be informed by, and based on, solid exegesis. Students will relish the study of exegesis if they regard it as the foundation of a grand vision. Yet if exegesis is simply considered to be expertise in a specialized discipline, only a few will be interested; the majority will ignore acquiring the tools needed to practice this discipline.

Exegesis will not be the passion of students unless they see that it plays a vital role in the formation of one’s worldview. An intellectual inclination for exegesis, although crucial, is not sufficient. Exegesis will never be one’s passion unless one’s heart is gripped by biblical truth; only then will it lead to a deeper and richer joy in God (John 15:11). If one’s heart never sings when doing exegesis, then the process has not reached its culmination. And if one has never trembled when doing exegesis (Isa. 66:2), then one is not listening for the voice of God.

The renewal of our minds and the flaming of the heart are designed to lead to obedience, to a change in the way we live, to the approving of the perfect will of God in our experience (Rom. 12:2). And not only that: persons who have been transformed by the biblical text will also want to share the truth that has changed them with others. Like the Servant of the Lord, we will be taught “to know the word that sustains the weary” (Isa. 50:4). We will communicate these truths to “reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2).

To sum up: Exegesis is part of the process of building one’s worldview; as one understands God’s truth, it inflames one’s heart and constrains one to live a new life and to pass this new truth on to others. Thereby the kingdom of God advances, and God is glorified.

Assumptions in Forming a Worldview

Two assumptions are implicit in what I have written above, and they should be made explicit. First, we cannot build a worldview from Scripture unless the Scriptures present a unified worldview. If the Scriptures are contradictory in what they teach, then we cannot derive a coherent worldview from them. Here I assume that the Scriptures do present a coherent and consistent worldview, but such an assertion will not be defended in detail here.5

Second, I assume the law of noncontradiction to be foundational for one’s view of truth. The law of noncontradiction is not just a Western conception of truth. If we dispense with the law of noncontradiction, then all rational discussion is impossible.6 For example, if we claim that what James and Paul teach about justification is actually contradictory, that James and Paul affirm two different and mutually exclusive ways of justification, then the only rational conclusion is that they contradict each other. And if they do contradict, then the Bible ceases to be authoritative on the issue of justification since it teaches no consistent view. Whether we prefer Paul or James will primarily be a matter of our subjective preference. And if Scripture is contradictory in one place, there is no reason in principle why it could not be contradictory in others as well. Now reasons could be given here for the complementary nature of Paul’s and James’s views of justification. But the point here is simply this: in this book I will assume that Scripture is consistent and that it does not contradict itself.

Definition of Exegesis and the Intention of the Author

Exegesis is the method by which we ascertain what authors meant when they wrote a particular piece of literature. The meaning of Scripture cannot be separated from the intention of the author as that


intention is expressed in the words of the text.\(^7\) I am convinced that we can discover the meaning intended by the human authors of Scripture, even if our knowledge of the biblical text will never be comprehensive. We can know truly even if we do not know exhaustively. Any theory claiming that the meaning of the author is unattainable or that the reader imposes one’s own meaning onto the text should be rejected. This is not to deny that there is a divine meaning in Scripture that surpasses the comprehension of human authors. From reading the entire canon we can discern the fullness of revelation in a way that was not accessible to Moses, David, and Isaiah.\(^8\) Still, the divine meaning of the text is not finally at variance from the meaning of the original authors. The divine meaning of the text corresponds to the intention of the human authors, and it must be defended textually.\(^9\)

The Role of Preunderstanding in Exegesis

Most scholars now agree that exegesis without presuppositions is impossible, especially with the dawn of postmodernism.\(^10\) We are all


\(^8.\) In other words, when all is said and done, the Scriptures testify of Jesus Christ in a way that accords with what is written in the OT, even if OT writers failed to grasp the fullness of what they wrote. See Edward P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1991); Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002).


shaped by our culture and background. Many of our presuppositions are helpful and valuable. Every time we sit in a chair, we do not have to reconstruct the experiences by which we learned that chairs will bear our weight; we presuppose that chairs will support our weight. From what we read in the Bible, we rightly presuppose that God is good; thus we appropriately ask why he allows suffering. Imagine a situation where we did not even ask this question! Our presuppositions can provoke us to ask profound and crucial questions that assist us in grasping the meaning of the biblical text.

However, our presuppositions can blind us to the truth as well. In reading the story about the feeding of the five thousand, for example, we may assume that miracles do not happen; then we may explain the story in terms of a young boy’s sharing his lunch with others. In this instance, such a presupposition or preunderstanding blinds us to what the text is actually saying. Or if we presuppose that we can never understand the biblical text because we are limited by our historical location, then we have effectively denied that the Spirit of God can communicate with his creatures. Instead, we should acknowledge, along with the apostle Paul, that the Holy Spirit can teach the truths of God to us (1 Cor. 2:6–16).

The crucial question is this: Can we detect incorrect presuppositions and modify our worldview so that we can understand what Paul (or any author) intended when he wrote his letters? If this is not possible, then it follows that no learning or change in thinking is possible for human beings. We are trapped in our own culture and worldview. And if we can never break out of our own preunderstanding, why should we ever try to comprehend another person’s point of view? We could never really understand another anyway. Such a nihilistic view should be rejected because it contradicts human experience. We can understand those whose thinking is alien to us, even though such a process may take great effort. Most important, such a view rejects the idea that God can cut through our fallibility and finitude and speak a comprehensible word. If we are willing to let the Scriptures challenge our most cherished ideas and opinions (and the Spirit can soften our hearts so that we are open to truth), then we will be able to understand the Scriptures and let them form our worldview.


The Art of Interpretation

This book will focus on the methodology that should be used in interpreting the Pauline Letters. Methodology focuses on the science of interpretation: the principles and procedures that are essential for exegesis. Nevertheless, interpretation is also an artistic enterprise. For instance, the forming of a hypothesis regarding the interpretation of a passage is a product of the imagination. Since exegesis is both a science and an art, we cannot expect that the right interpretation will automatically emerge by following the steps outlined in this book. In every interpretation we are dealing with degrees of probability in formulating an interpretation. Absolute certainty is not possible. This does not lead to relativism in interpretation, for some interpretations are more probable than others. Evidence and logic are used to establish the probability of various interpretations. The interpretation that is the most coherent and comprehensive is the most probable. Even scientists recognize today that nothing can be proved absolutely. Nevertheless, some things are more probable than others. For example, it is possible that the world we live in is an illusion and life is a dream, but such a view of reality is not plausible. So too, the interpretations of some biblical texts are virtually certain, while in other texts the meaning is more debatable. The careful interpreter acknowledges a sliding scale of probability and emphasizes the truth of an interpretation accordingly.