

True to the Word: Four Quadrants Approach to Bible Study

Wann Fanwar

Abstract

An overriding concern of those who read and study the Bible is, 'What is the most effective way to study the Bible?' there are many methodologies that have been employed by trained exegetes, pastors, and members of the church. This article samples some of these methodologies and then makes a proposal based on the four quadrants of a circle. The interchange between the four quadrants is viewed as producing a highly effective method of Bible study. While the study primarily targets pastors and church members, it can also benefit trained exegetes.

Key words: Word, Bible study, exegesis, quadrants

Introduction

Whether a person is a biblical scholar or simply a lay member in church, studying the Bible is seen as a paramount duty of faith. However, this task is not as straight forward as might be expected. There is inevitably a struggle that pertains not so much to knowledge as to methodology. In a sea of data and research, with knowledge overwhelming us, Bible students of all grades cannot help but feel swamped by the issue of methodology. Essentially, the big question is 'How do I study the Bible?' Every reader of the Bible is concerned with extracting the optimum knowledge and inspiration from the Scriptures to assist in his or her daily life, the application of faith, and the understanding of the deep things of God.

A secondary question arises. 'Is there a method of Bible study that is better or more fulfilling than others?' This question recognises that there seem to be as many Bible study methodologies as there is biblical knowledge. Every 'teacher' or 'preacher' of the word will propound his or her own methodology. Frequently, such methodologies have arisen from a personal walk with the word and may not reflect any particular system of study. In practical terms, 'what works for me should work for others' is the attitude held by many who teach or preach the word. The questions I am often asked are, 'How did you learn about that?' 'How do you know that?' 'How did you do that?'

This article is an attempt to articulate what I consider to be an effective methodology of Bible study or exegesis, one that is feasible for both scholarly and non-scholarly use. I do not assume that I have cornered the market on this issue, but I have learnt many things in nearly thirty years of teaching and preaching the Bible. This article is also a culmination of sorts of a long journey of searching and applying different methodologies for studying the Bible. I also confess that I have varied my own methodology from time to time in an attempt to find the next suitable method and I admit that even this article may not be the end of my own journey. Nevertheless, it is time to share my personal synthesis of what I have learnt in order to help others along the way.

With this in mind, I will explore a sampling of Bible study methodologies and then offer my own proposal for consideration. My aim is that those readers who have struggled to discover an effective method of Bible study might find this one helpful and beneficial. Perhaps as we strive to do this we may discover what it really means to be 'true to the word'.

Methodologies of Bible Study

In order to set the tone for this work, it is necessary to do a broad survey of Bible study or exegetical methods that others have used and proposed. Since this article targets both scholarly and less-scholarly

interests, I have chosen to highlight a few methods from each background. It is important to recognise the methodology that is used and to ascertain its strengths and weaknesses so as to get closer to the word of God.

Folk Exegesis

The term, 'folk exegesis', here simply refers to those methods of Bible study that are employed by students of the word at the church level. Normally, such students do not have much technical training in exegesis or hermeneutics. However, they may spend a lifetime reading the Bible and striving to come to terms with its message. Some of these students may also include pastors and school teachers who handle the word on a daily basis but have not been to a seminary or received any specific training on Bible study methods. Folk exegesis also encompasses those who teach or study the Bible within the constraints of their theological traditions and as such may not sense the larger freedom of studying the word. Arguably, the majority of those who study the Bible belong to the realm of folk exegesis, but even in this arena there is a variety of methodologies used.

Devotional exegesis

It may be argued that the most commonly used system of Bible study is the devotional method (see Ehrman, 2009, p. 2). This method operates with a simple assumption in mind: the Bible is the word of God and can be understood by everyone who searches. Added to this is the conviction that Scripture is inspired and therefore is spiritually discerned. The concept suggests that those who are spiritual can understand the Bible. From this basic platform arises a simple methodology: pray, read the Bible, meditate on the word, and reach a conclusion or application.

One drawback of the method is that it inculcates a form of spiritual laziness that discourages any serious search for the deeper meaning of the passage. Those who use this method often ignore the passage in its biblical, historical, and cultural contexts, treating the Bible as though it exists in some sort of spiritual vacuum without any external referent. More likely than not, they are more dependent on secondary material (devotional readings, commentaries, lectionaries, etc) for interpretation than upon serious search.

Another drawback is the element of subjectivity that is brought to bear upon the text. At a recent meeting, I presented the full facts of the food laws in Leviticus. My audience comprised people who actually practise some of these laws but were unaware of the full extent of the laws. After the presentation, a member of the audience who apparently found this fuller exegesis difficult to accept, said to me, 'You almost convinced me, but I still think that . . .!' This is an attitude that is engendered by the methodology.

We need to meditate on the word of God and learn its lessons. Nevertheless, if this is our primary method of study, it is possible that we may not be able to be 'true to the word'!

Fantasy Exegesis

A classic example of fantasy exegesis involves the David and Goliath story. As a child I learnt the song, 'only a boy name David, only a little sling; . . . and five little stones he took . . .!' Generations of Christian children have grown up believing the song and never realise that most of the song is not in the Bible story. Not long ago, I heard a preacher wax eloquently about the miracle of David's victory over Goliath and 'wowed' his audience with grand embellishments of how a little boy was used by God to defeat a godless giant. His message was equally captivating: no matter how small or weak you are, God will enable you to achieve victory.

At first glance, both the song and the sermon seem biblical. However, closer inspection of the text reveals the following facts about the actual Bible story: David was already a soldier in King Saul's army at this point of his life (see 1 Sam 16); by his own admission, he had already killed a lion and a bear; he was old enough to ask what reward he will get for defeating Goliath (a wife!); he chose to fight without heavy armour to maintain his mobility against a lumbering giant; he used a long-range weapon (a sling) against Goliath's hand to hand combat weapons (which, incidentally, were extremely heavy and cumbersome); and he had the strength to wield Goliath's giant sword and cut off Goliath's head with it (can a small boy really perform such a feat?). Archaeological excavations have shown that sling stones are anything but little. If David was truly a small boy, his father, Jesse, would have been the worst father in the planet for sending this little boy alone to the battle front to carry food supplies and news!

There is no doubt that David's courage was fuelled by his knowledge of and trust in God. However, to present David as a little boy is to be untrue to the word.

The proof text method of exegesis is a principal method of Bible study used by both scholars and lay members alike. Its premise is quite simple: pick all the verses that address a particular subject, put them together, organise them thematically, and then form a conclusion that this is a doctrine of the Bible. Denominational doctrines were born precisely this way and, regardless of our persuasion, are believed to be biblical truth. At the more technical level, this is considered a propositional approach to the truths of the Bible. For over two thousand years, Christian theology has been governed by this approach to the Bible and the methodology is so embedded in the Christian psyche that few members in the churches even bother to question its validity.

The proof text method has much to commend it. It is simple to construct and easy to use. History testifies to this and most pastors and Bible teachers utilise it to such an extent that many members think this is Bible study.

However, there are serious drawbacks with this system of study. First, the method tends to ignore not only the historical and social contexts of biblical materials, but also the biblical context itself. For instance, the word 'save' represents a major concept in the Bible. To most Christians, the word 'save' refers to that act of God that delivers us from sin. A close examination of biblical data reveals that there are several Hebrew (*yasha, ga'al, padah*, etc) and Greek (*sozo, therapeuo, 'iaomai*, etc) words that are translated 'save'. The semantic range of each word differs from the others and from the English counterpart 'save'. These words include every form of deliverance and so the biblical concept of salvation connotes far more than just rescue from sin.

Second, those who use this method often pay little or no attention to the details of the texts they study. People are often surprised to discover that the fishermen disciples of Jesus were not poor but well-to-do entrepreneurs or that Bathsheba was not the first wife that David took from another man. Some will contend that it is only the message of the Bible that matters and knowing all its details is unnecessary. To say that is to belittle the inspiration of the Bible. We are left to wonder why God gave us all these details if he never intended for them to be learnt.

Third, the innate subjectivity of proof text conclusions has given birth to the multiplicity of denominational differences within Christendom. The plethora of churches, each one claiming to have the truth, makes the gospel unappealing to the adherents of the world's major religions and it is apparent that this state of affairs exists primarily because of this form of exegesis and its inevitable power to divide the Christian world.

Two important questions could be raised. Can the proof text method enable us to really know the true word of God? Or does it merely feed our desire to compartmentalise the ideas of Scripture into manageable bytes?

'Professional' Exegesis

A form of exegesis or study method that is sometimes encountered but for which no appropriate label exists, can be called 'professional' exegesis. This label should be used with a great deal of caution. There are many who study the Bible and formulate their understanding of what it teaches. Many of these are persons in other academic or professional disciplines. Often they are highly educated and trained to think critically. They may be educators or learned lay members in the church. Many of them may actually teach Bible in the local church setting. The combination of high education, experience, and status engenders a degree of confidence about their ability to speak authoritatively on biblical matters. Because of their station in life, they are also given opportunities to offer opinion on Scripture. Yet, many of them are untrained in the tools of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics.

What sometimes happens in this situation is that there are persons who speak with authority but whose conclusions may simply be, 'This is what I think the Bible means!' Instead of using the tools of the trade, they impose the tools of their own disciplines to interpret the Bible. Consequently we may observe various ways of reading the Bible from a psychological perspective because that is the discipline of the teachers. Others read the Bible as science manual because science is their field. Frequently, these people do not hesitate to second guess those with the training in exegesis and theological analysis.

This is not an elitist proposition, but a simple statement of a fact of learning: every educated person has an area of expertise and the world of learning works better when people stick to their areas of expertise. When a scientist who has not learnt the tools of literary analysis comments on the creation story of Genesis 1, there

is a good chance he or she will not recognise the narrative techniques built into the story and will attempt to discover evidence for creation science (perhaps) at the expense of the story. Sometimes theologians themselves are guilty of this error because some of them do not hesitate to pontificate on material they have no expertise in.

It may be postulated that pastors, Bible teachers, and others involved in some form of teaching the Bible owe it to themselves and others to learn the proper tools of exegesis in order to be 'true to the word'. Bible students of all shades also owe this same favour to themselves. At times there is too much human opinion in the preaching and teaching of the word that many members of the church are unable to discern the word of God from the word of man.

Incomplete Exegesis

The influence of external factors in any approach to Bible study is difficult to estimate. Every reader or student is affected by what is learnt as a child or taught within their own faith spectrum. Truth is invariably associated with church dogma rather than any serious search of the word of God. Many denominations make dogma a test of faith and then use this ecclesiastical leverage to control what their members learn or think. In many ways the excesses of medieval Christianity have never truly departed from the Church. This is normally achieved in one of two ways, by subscribing to a creed or developing a statement of beliefs. Both have the same end result; they stifle genuine Bible study.

This scenario may be somewhat extreme but it does reflect an approach to the Bible that renders exegesis nearly always incomplete. However, this can happen in a more mundane manner. It is often bemusing to inspect the inordinate amount of attention that Joseph receives from those who preach or teach Genesis. Unnoticed by many readers, Gen 37-50, the longest narrative cycle in the book, highlights two of Jacob's sons, Judah and Joseph. Even scholars are sometimes misled and view these chapters as the Joseph Cycle or story or the Joseph narratives (Sailhamer, 1992, p. 206; Wenham, 1994, p. 344). However, a close examination of the chapters uncovers two principal characters, Joseph and Judah. In Gen 37 it appears that the rest of the family would bow and praise Joseph, but in Gen 49, the family bows to Judah. Judah is the last character introduced in Genesis (a common pattern in the book when dealing with those whom God chooses) and, on his death bed, Jacob acknowledges the supremacy of Judah (Gen 49:10). If the story is tracked further into the Bible, Ps 78:67-68 reveals the fact that God chose Judah and rejected Joseph. Further, in later times, the house of Judah is associated with the Messiah (Ps 78:67-68; Isa 2:1-4; Mic 5:2; etc), while the house of Joseph is associated with idolatry (Hos 11:1-12). Clearly, God had a short-term role for Joseph, but an eternal one for Judah. Sadly, most of the sermons, lessons, and even children's stories revolve around Joseph. Judah is the forgotten son, even though he is the chosen one of God (see Fanwar, 2007, pp. 14-31; and, 2009, pp. 23-28).

Incomplete exegesis demonstrates the need to develop a synthetic view of Scripture, one that will allow the reader to view all the details before making conclusions. At times it is perplexing to observe the incompleteness of biblical knowledge even among those whose job it is to preach and teach the word of God. The need to be 'true to the word' should underpin all exegetical and study methods.

Samples of Exegetical Methodologies

There are many exegetical approaches among biblical exegetes, theologians, and homileticians that it is impossible to discuss all of them. A sampling of views should suffice to demonstrate just how diverse the field of study is. To place the present proposal in perspective, it is imperative to analyse some of these methodologies.

Marvin A McMinckle

McMinkle, pastor and professor of homiletics, suggests an exegetical method that is homiletical, with an eye on historical-critical methodology. He employs an alliterative technique for what he terms the 8 Ls methodology for studying the Bible. These steps are enumerated below (2001, pp. 1-8).

- **Limits.** The first step in studying the Bible is the need to establish the boundaries of the unit or pericope. Biblical material is best understood within the framework of naturally occurring thought units. Following these units provides more adequate control on what is studied and the consequent conclusions.

-
- Literature. The Bible is a book and should be studied as such. It is important to recognize the type or genre of literature and the types of materials that are involved. Doing this ensures that materials are interpreted in a manner natural to and consistent with the passage.
 - Location. This step is concerned with contextual identity. Every passage reflects social, political, and historical settings which impact the fuller meaning of the unit.
 - Language. The Bible was not written in English and a diligent and careful student of the word will recognize this and seek to understand the original languages. When things are translated, there is inevitably some loss of meaning in the transfer. Referring back to the original Hebrew or Greek assists in the recovery of some of this lost meaning.
 - Links. As the word of God, no biblical passage stands on its own. Every text is connected in some way with other texts. The relationship may be one of dependence or even tension. These connections have to be explored for a more complete understanding of the message. Exegetes often refer to this as intertextuality. It is an important part of exegesis or Bible study.
 - Leads. McMinkle's concept of 'leads' pertains to the narrative nature of so much of the Bible. Anyone who reads the Bible discovers that there are many characters; there are protagonists or antagonists. These characters are depicted in specific ways; this is characterisation. All this is part of the art of telling stories that is prevalent in Scripture.
 - Lessons. Sometimes exegetes refer to this step as the 'meant' of the text. To properly understand the message of any unit, it is necessary to determine its meaning to the audience at the time of writing, the original audience. Without seeing the text through their eyes it is highly probable that the text will be misapplied.
 - Life application. The final step in McMinkle's method is to discover the message for today. Since the Bible is the word of God, its message is relevant to all ages. Ultimately, Bible study is not an academic exercise; it is for the purpose of knowing God's word in today's world.

Lee J Gugliotto

Gugliotto has been a pastor and teacher and has taught classes in biblical languages, theology, and hermeneutics. He employs the word 'analysis' to describe his proposed exegetical methodology. His analysis of biblical material involves six steps (2000, pp. 20-21).

- Contextual analysis. For Gugliotto, contextual analysis has to do with the biblical or immediate context. Every passage has a specific location and that location to a great extent determines its meaning.
- Structural analysis. Because the Bible is also a literary work, literary analysis should be carried out so as to arrive at a more complete understanding. Literary analysis includes examination of the literary style, literary type, and characteristic features of any given passage.
- Verbal analysis. This has to do with the language of the Bible. It requires exploration of individual words, unfamiliar words, word forms, figures of speech, and symbols.
- Cultural analysis. Besides studying the immediate biblical context of a passage, it is also important to learn about the historical-cultural background, history, geography, environment, and related issues which pertain to the text.
- Theological analysis. The message of the individual passage and its relation to the rest of the Bible should be determined. The theological development of the message should also be studied so as to decipher its ongoing impact.
- Homiletical analysis. Bible study is never complete unless it is able to relate the author's meaning to the audience. Gugliotto's homiletical analysis is what others may call application but the primary intent appears to be that exegesis should invariably culminate in a preached message; the written word becoming the spoken word.

Ng Kah Seng

My late friend, Ng Kah Seng, was a pastor and theology professor for many years in Asia. He developed a six step exegetical method based on the acronym SEARCH—survey, examine, analyse, recognise, compare, and harmonise (1989, p. 6).

S: step 1 in this method is about surveying the literary context. This would include the immediate biblical context as well as the literary aspects of the passage.

E: step 2 is about examining the historical, geographical, and cultural backgrounds that impact the passage.

A: step 3 requires analysing the linguistic, grammatical, and semantic elements of the passage.

R: step 4 is for recognising the theological message of the passage.

C: step 5 involves comparing the passage with other sources such as commentaries.

H: step 6 is about harmonising the application of the message or theological idea with the intention of the passage.

Douglas Stuart

Stuart is a professor of OT studies. As an OT scholar, his exegetical steps clearly reflect the unique demands of OT studies. His exegetical method is rather comprehensive and has much to commend it. However, it may prove far too daunting a task for the average student in the pew and therefore may be limited to scholarly use. Nevertheless, it provides a useful paradigmatic comparison. The 12 steps suggested by Stuart (1984, pp. 23-43) are listed and explained below and, for the truly daring, offer a comprehensive approach to Bible study.

- Text. The first step in exegesis is to confirm the limits of the passage, compare versions (say MT with LXX), and reconstruct and annotate the text (a highly technical task out of reach of most non-scholarly students). When dealing with poetic materials (say the psalms), it may be necessary to present poetry in versified form so as to capture the special elements of Hebrew poetry.
- Translation. Every serious student should then prepare a tentative translation of the passage in question. Subsequently, the correspondence of the text and its translation should be checked. Then, a revision of the translation and a finished translation should be provided.
- Historical context. The next area of research concerns the historical background, social setting, historical foreground, and geographical background that inform the passage. This also includes an attempt to date the passage.
- Literary context. The literary function and placement of the text should be examined. This involves analysing the details of the text and authorship issues.
- Form. Also germane to any Bible study or exegesis is the task of identifying genre and form. It is necessary to look for subcategories, suggest a life setting, analyse the completeness of the form, and be alert to partial and broken forms.
- Structure. The outline of the passage often betrays the flow of thought within the passage. It is needful to look for patterns, organise the discovered structure to descending units of size, and evaluate intentionality of minor patterns. Further, poetics should be analysed if the passage demands this.
- Grammatical data. Since the Bible was not written in English, analysis should be made of the significant grammatical issues, orthography, morphology and other affinities that would provide a better understanding of the text.
- Lexical data. Exploring lexical meanings of words will explain what is not obvious. It may enable the

student to concentrate on key words and wordings, do word studies for the most crucial words, and identify any special semantic features prevalent in the passage.

- Biblical context. The next step calls for an analysis of the use of the passage elsewhere in Scripture, its relation to the rest of Scripture, and its import for understanding Scripture as a whole.
- Theology. It is also important to locate the passage theologically. Specific issues that are raised or solved in the text need to be identified. Moreover, the theological contribution of the passage should be explored.
- Secondary literature. Another task of exegesis is to investigate what others have said about the passage. It is beneficial to compare conclusions with those of others and adjust positions wherever necessary. By examining the discoveries of others personal discoveries can be better applied.
- Application. An effective Bible study will produce a list life issues, clarify the nature and possible areas of clarification, identify the audience of application, establish categories of application, determine the time focus of application, and fix limits of applications.

Craig C Broyles

Broyles is a professor of religious studies and his proposed methodology (2001, pp. 20-23) is a very comprehensive one and covers just about every aspect of exegesis that can be discussed. However, the method is rather scholarly and may not be as usable for those without theological training. Nevertheless, it is worth exploring as it provides a framework for a very comprehensive approach to Bible study.

1. Delimiting a passage. Like most scholars, Broyles reiterates the need for a proper starting point to Bible study and exegesis, discovering the limits of the passage or unit that is intended.
2. Translation and textual criticism. Once the unit is chosen, the next task is to translate the passage and consider the development of the text itself. Think of this as a journey through which the text has travelled to the point that is now known, its canonical status.
3. Meditation. Intriguingly, Broyles suggests that the next step of exegesis is to meditate upon the text so as to allow the text to speak. It is imperative to remember that the Bible is the word of God and as such should be approached with spiritual intentionality.
4. Literary analysis. Arguably, the most difficult part of exegesis or Bible study is about coming to terms with the literary nature of any passage. In analysing the literary aspects of a text, the following items should be considered.
 - Theme. Every passage contains a theme or concept.
 - Structure. Biblical texts also have structure, the arrangement that reveals the pattern of thought within the passage.
 - Genre and social setting. The Bible is set in time and place and reveals the experiences and worldview of the time and place. The genre of the text and its social setting are integral to any study of the word.
 - Point of view, characterisation, style, mood, and selectivity. Every writer of the Bible exhibits a unique perspective and style. The writer's point of view or the mood of the text informs the passage. The manner in which the author characterises persons in the narrative can be uncovered.
 - Grammar and word analysis. Linguistics is a crucial aspect of exegesis since the Bible was not written in English but rather in Hebrew and Greek with limited portions in Aramaic. Understanding these languages often opens the reader to possibilities that are not readily available in translation. Linguistic analysis should include at least the following:

-
- Grammar. For instance, Hebrew grammar does not function like English grammar and, recognising this, enables the reader to avoid fallacious interpretations.
 - Figures of speech. Figures of speech, whether simple word plays or complex idiomatic expressions, are not readily translatable and yet they can have a great impact upon the meaning of the text.
 - Word studies. In every language, words have a specific semantic range. For instance, the smaller vocabulary of biblical Hebrew results in larger semantic ranges for every word when compared with the semantic ranges of English words.
5. Context. Sometimes Bible students, in their desire to know the 'truth', ignore a simple fact: that the Bible was not written in vacuum but in real time and space. Therefore, it exhibits different types of contextual issues.
- Literary and generic. Context is internal to the text itself as each unit or passage contains literary elements that should be examined.
 - Historical and sociological. There are also historical and sociological considerations to be explored. It is helpful to explicate the time and culture of the biblical writers and the issues that were pertinent to them.
 - Traditional. This element concerns the path that a text has taken to its present form. It should be remembered that the Hebrew text has a different tradition from the Greek text. The way Scripture has been handled in Judaism and early Christianity should be considered as well.
 - Intertextual/canonical. Since the Bible is the word of God, there are literary connections between the books and even individual units. There are shared words, grammatical and literary patterns that tie together text with text.
 - Biblical/theological. Furthermore, there are also conceptual connections that tie the Bible together into a holistic message.
 - Extrabiblical and cultural. Contextual analysis also calls for a look at the milieu of the ancient Near East, the world in which the Bible was written.
6. Compositional history. Broyles also recommends that exegesis should involve studying the compositional history of the text. This is a principal concern of critical studies that is often quickly brushed aside by those who study the Bible from a faith perspective. Nevertheless, it is a useful tool to consider.
- Oral transmission. Much of biblical scholarship today recognises that the biblical texts frequently were passed from person to person in an oral manner before they were recorded down in written form.
 - Literary sources and redaction. It is also possible that biblical texts employed materials from external sources and a certain amount of editorial work may therefore be involved.
7. Theological implications and application. Scholars usually speak of the 'meant' and the 'means' when attempting to decipher the message of a text. The theology of a passage includes its meaning to the original readers and its application to readers today.
8. Secondary literature. The final step in Broyles' methodology pertains to the issue of secondary literature. The Bible is arguably the most studied book in human history and it is needful to consider what others have said about the text. The study of secondary literature incorporates two elements:
- Current interpretation explores the most significant interpretations that are salient to the text.
 - History of interpretation looks at the journey of interpretation that impacts the text.
-

David Alan Black

Having examined two OT scholarly approaches, it is helpful to also consider a NT perspective. David Black is a professor of NT theology and has authored books on NT Greek linguistics and NT criticism. From a conceptual point of view, few can match the simplicity of Black's methodology (1993, pp. 63-115). This method is rather comprehensive, but is fairly easy to use, even for those with little theological training.

- The view from 'above'. This perspective views the text in terms of historical and literary analyses.
 - Historical analysis surveys the historical context relevant to the text.
 - Literary analysis involves the ability to observe the larger literary context that impacts the text.
- The view from 'within'. Here the exegete views the text from the inside out and this entails certain components.
 - Textual analysis is an attempt to resolve any significant textual issues.
 - Lexical analysis attempts to determine the meaning of crucial words.
 - Syntactical analysis analyses the syntax and linguistic structures prevalent in the text.
 - Structural analysis helps to determine the structure of the passage or book.
 - Rhetorical analysis seeks to penetrate the significant rhetorical features embedded in the text.
 - Tradition analysis observes how many sources were used and the effect of these sources on the text.
- The view from 'under'. This is where the exegete views the text from a conceptual framework and places himself or herself in subordination to the message of the Bible.
 - Theological analysis is used to determine the key thought of the passage being studied.
 - Homiletical analysis derives a homiletical outline from the text.

Wann Fanwar

I have been teaching homiletics for over 20 years. During that time I have taught the following steps to sermonic exegesis. While I believe that this methodology outlines the principal steps in studying the Bible, I also think that it is time to develop the process further. Before doing that, it is necessary to explicate what I have already used. This version of 'sermonic exegesis' involves four tasks or steps.

- Exegesis Step 1: Textual Analysis. The first step of exegesis investigates the text itself and does this with the following items in mind.
 - Choose a unit. The simplest way to do this is to ask a question, 'What is the passage to be studied?' This helps to determine the unit from a literary point of view.
 - Determine the 'cut off' points. Where does the passage begin and end? It should be noted that biblical units are not dependent upon the versification, a system introduced late into the text.
 - Investigate significant words and phrases. Word study is a significant portion of exegesis.
 - Explore the grammar and syntax. It is preferable to perform this step with the original languages in mind wherever possible.
 - Define the structure. The arrangement of thoughts or ideas is also relevant to Bible study because it portrays the conceptual development of the text.

-
- Exegesis Step 2: Contextual Consideration. The second task of exegesis is to analyse the various types of contexts that are pertinent to the text.
 - Learn about the author and his life. Who was the author of the passage or book? How did his life affect his writing? Where was he coming from?
 - Consider the time and date of writing. When was the passage or book written?
 - Explore the history of the period. What was happening during this period? How did the event of the period affect the author and his work?
 - Determine the purpose for writing. Why was this passage or book written? What problems are being addressed? What need is being referred to?
 - Look at the subject before and after. What is discussed immediately before and after this passage? How does this impact the passage?
 - Compare parallel passages. What other biblical passages address the same issues, needs, or questions? How do these other passages affect the text under study?
 - Exegesis Step 3: Literary Exploration. The next task of exegesis pertains to the literary nature of the Bible. As a book, the Bible displays literary characteristics common to all written literature.
 - Analyse the literary type. Is the passage law or poetry or narrative? How does the literary type inform the meaning of the text?
 - Investigate the figures of speech and other metaphors. What figures of speech are present in the text? Is the figure of speech a parable or an allegory? What symbolisms are present in the passage?
 - Exegesis Step 4: Theological Analysis. The final step of this exegetical method is to discover the conceptual framework of the text or book.
 - Determine the primary idea. What is the passage really saying?
 - Explore the relationship to other scriptural material. Are there similarities and differences with the parallel passages? Is the passage contributing something new?
 - Articulate the 'meant' and the 'means'. How did the original readers understand the passage? How should today's readers understand it?
 - Homiletical reflection. While homiletical reflection is not, strictly speaking, an exegetical step, it is an expected outcome for most pastors and preachers. Such reflection should include these ideas.
 - Determine the idea to be preached
 - Define the need or problem in the church that needs to be addressed
 - Choose the preaching style that will best suit the message of the passage
 - Organise the sermon to fit the chosen style

Four Quadrants Approach

Every exegetical method has points of commendation and areas that are difficult to replicate in certain circumstances. Having pursued this subject for a large portion of my preaching and teaching life, I am compelled to continue searching for a more effective method of studying the Bible. With this in mind, I make the following proposal with the hope that fellow-searchers may find this a beneficial tool to use.

The Four Quadrants Approach is an exegetical system that views the various elements of the text as belonging to four areas within a circle. The four areas are: textual, contextual, conceptual, and practical.

Textual

This quadrant examines specific elements pertaining to the text. The first aspect of this quadrant is the language itself. Since the Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, it is essential to come to terms with these languages. The grammar, syntax, and idiom of these languages should be carefully studied because every language has its own idiosyncrasies that distinguish it from other languages. For example, Hebrew sentences utilise the 'verb-subject-predicate' structure, whereas English employs the 'subject-verb-predicate' structure, and Greek follows a case-driven structure. In Gen 1:1, the Hebrew literally reads '*in the beginning he created (verb) God (subject) the heavens and the earth (predicate)*.' This has to be rearranged in English as '*in the beginning God (subject) created (verb) the heavens and the earth (predicate)*' to fit English syntax. Further, a people's worldview and mindset are also couched in a specific language and misunderstanding these elements may result in unexpected mistranslations. To be 'true to the word' requires careful consideration of these linguistic features.

Another textual element to explore concerns the literary nature of the text. The Bible is the word of God but it is also a 'book'. As a book, the Bible contains literary elements such as narrative techniques, genre, poetics, and figures of speech. Hebrew narratives are characterised by brevity and lack of emotive language. Hebrew poetry is characterized by parallelism, while prophetic material conjures up seemingly endless word plays. The Greek NT comprises many epistles (letters) and such literature displays specific literary elements that differ from other forms. The parables of Jesus require certain exegetical skills and ignoring these interpretative elements could give rise to concepts that are not 'true to the word'. Translating and interpreting these varied features become challenging and demand careful attention.

Textual exploration also means that the history and culture that impact the text should be studied. The Bible was not written in historical or cultural vacuum. When exegeting the stories, laws, poems, and other biblical materials, the history of the times and the surrounding culture engender a more accurate reading. The biblical patriarchs lived in a world that was predominantly polygamous and tribal. Their questions and needs differ markedly from today's world. They lived in tents and retained a private militia for security. Today, people no longer live that way. Sometimes the desire to understand the application of Scripture produces a hasty approach to Bible study that results in faulty and indefensible conclusions.

Contextual

The second quadrant that impacts biblical exegesis directly pertains to the reader's context or situation. The Bible is studied for communicative purposes; it is the word of God that needs to be preached and taught. Every reader comes equipped with a complete experience of language, literature, history, and culture. There are linguistic and grammatical differences between the reader's language and that of biblical languages. In Hebrew, the first personal pronoun ('*ani*') can be used alone without any helping verb to convey the sense of 'I am'. However, in English, this is not possible and so the auxiliary verb 'to be' is attached to pronouns for a similar sense. A different system is displayed in the Thai language where the pronoun can even be dispensed with but is implied.

The reader's context also involves literature, history, and culture. In Thailand, not only do people speak a tonal language (Hebrew is guttural) but they have a distinctive history and culture. In the land of Israel, God's prophets had to contend with primal religions, whereas missionaries in Thailand encounter Buddhism, a largely monistic faith. In Bible times, people ate 'bread', while in Thailand people eat rice. The interchange between histories and cultures requires careful interpretation and application.

The textual and contextual quadrants intersect directly and the exegete should proceed intentionally between the two quadrants. While exploring the biblical text, the reader's context should also be examined. For example, in Gen 22, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. To most modern readers this is an incredulous demand. As modern readers we have to contend with government regulations that would make a similar display today seem criminal. Should one of my married students announce that he or she was asked by God to sacrifice a child, the chances are that the student would end up in a psychiatric facility or worse prison. Clearly the command of God cannot be taken literally as applying to us. Nevertheless, its message should be wrestled with. This type of reflection makes it possible to decipher the similarities and differences between the text and the exegete's context, which in turn fosters a more optimal interpretative framework. With such an approach, there is a greater chance of being 'true to the word'.

Conceptual

The third quadrant looks at conceptual elements that are foundational to any text. These will include theological ideas, doctrinal truths, and thought motifs. These are the conceptual threads that run through the text and bind the text to the rest of God's word. Inevitably, exegesis produces theological results because the study of God's word is not merely an academic enterprise, it is a faith endeavour. Most people who study the Bible are attempting to understand God's word for them and desire to share it with others. This activity comprises the mission of the church and is implicit to the work of theologians, pastors, teachers, and church members. This is what occurs at every occasion where the Bible is studied. Believers everywhere are seeking to come to terms with the message of God; it is integral to being 'true to the word'.

This quadrant also intersects directly with the first quadrant. While studying the text, its meaning becomes the principal focus of attention. This task is neither an afterthought, as is often the case, nor a pre-thought, as is evident in many study methods. It must occur simultaneous to the study of the text. It is also important to note that this quadrant does not intersect directly with the second quadrant. The meaning of the text is to be unveiled from within the text and cannot be derived from the reader's context. To return to Gen 22, in some countries, unwanted children are often 'sacrificed' at the altar of convenience (or even discarded) but such an approach to life does not resonate with the Genesis story. Conversely, those who come from cultures that place great emphasis on the rights of the firstborn (the family heir), God's demand may be met with a degree of cynicism. The conceptual framework of Gen 22 is the story itself. Recognising this allows the exegete to be 'true to the word'.

Practical

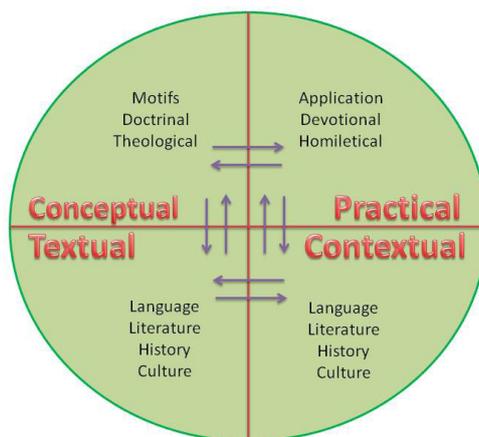
The final quadrant for biblical exegesis concerns practical matters. Most people who study, teach, or preach the Bible want to know how the word of God impacts real life. To be 'true to the word' means to discover how it informs and impacts life. There are at least three types of practical considerations: homiletical, devotional, and applicational. Preachers study the Bible so as to unveil its message to their audiences; they use the Bible to prepare sermons. Biblical preaching is a principal form of communicating the word of God. Therefore, homiletical analysis is a natural practical consequence of studying the Scriptures. Others study the Bible to find some meaning to their lives; to understand their existence. They want to know how the stories or songs of an ancient text can help them with the issues of today's world. They look to God's word for inspiration and to express their devotion. They seek application of the theological and doctrinal ideas of the word to their specific situations. This is often the overriding concern of many Bible students. It may be argued that without this quadrant, Bible study is no more than an academic exercise.

This final quadrant intersects directly with both the conceptual and contextual quadrants, but not so with the textual quadrant. One of the chief abuses of biblical data is the short circuit approach that leads many directly from text to application. Such an approach is prone to numerous subjective interpretations and does not lend itself to a 'true to the word' approach. A shortcut into application of Gen 22 may mean that someone believes that God is asking him or her to sacrifice everything that is important. Such an interpretation is fraught with danger because it ignores what can be gleaned conceptually and contextually. Application should fit both the theology of the passage and the context of the reader or exegete. Taking the time to carefully avoid quick application makes the final interpretation more 'true to the word'.

The diagram below illustrates the four quadrants and the arrows within the circle display the paths of intersections that would yield the most productivity in Bible study. In this method, every quadrant intersects directly with two other quadrants at any moment. The paths of intersection are as follows:

- Textual quadrant intersects with contextual and conceptual quadrants
- Contextual quadrant intersects with textual and practical quadrants
- Conceptual quadrant intersects with textual and practical quadrants
- Practical quadrant intersects with conceptual and contextual quadrants

4 Quadrants



The Four Quadrants of Bible Study

Using this system implies that Bible study does not proceed in a straight line but rather in lines that crisscross back and forth between quadrants. While investigating the linguistic and historical data of the biblical text, the parallel contextual data have to be explored, and the interplay of these elements has to be factored into the study. At the same time, the conceptual framework arising from the text surfaces and becomes part of the picture. Similarly, in digesting the conceptual scheme of the passage, the text itself provides the raw data for conceptual conclusions. While this is occurring, these same conclusions are informing the questions that arise from practical situations. This principle applies to every quadrant.

At this point, most students would want to know how to dissect each of the quadrants. The worksheet provided below is a suggestion to assist students and pastors who may want to try this exegetical method for themselves.

Suggested worksheet

To use this worksheet efficiently, I have suggested specific questions that could be asked to help focus the study. These questions are not exhaustive but they will provide a framework that even beginners can use. The more advanced students will ultimately discover other questions to ask and answer. If the relationship between the various quadrants is respected and short cuts are avoided, Bible study can become highly productive.

Textual (Q 1)		Contextual (Q 2)	Conceptual (Q 3)	Practical (Q 4)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the text to study? • What language is the text written in? • What specific linguistic elements can be observed? • What are the significant words or phrases? 	Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is my language? • How is my language different from the language of the text? • What are the appropriate words in my context for the significant ones in the passage? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the principal idea in the passage? • Are there other texts that address the same concept? • What other ideas run through the text? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the text mean to me? • What area or need of life does the text apply to?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What figures of speech are present? • What are the unique idiomatic expressions? • What is the literary type? • How does the literary type inform the passage? • What is the structure? 	Literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there similar figures of speech in my language? • Are there parallel idioms? • What are the similarities and differences between the text and my context in literary terms? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the original readers understand the text? • How should I understand the text now? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the message that needs to be re-spoken or retold?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who wrote the passage? • When was the passage written? • What was happening during the period? 	Historical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the historical differences between the text and my context? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What cultural elements are embedded in the text? 	Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What cultural elements in my context are similar to and different from those in the text? 		

Conclusion

Studying the Bible is a worthwhile enterprise from both academic and faith perspectives. However, knowing how to study efficiently is somewhat of a struggle for many people. This article is an attempt to alleviate some of this dilemma. The four quadrants approach will enable Bible students and teachers to handle the word of God more carefully, while retaining its contemporary relevance. To do this is to be ‘true to the word’.

There are many available methodologies for those who study the Bible and some of these are reviewed in this paper. Some students may find one of these approaches helpful. My own odyssey has led me to the proposal I have made. Perhaps the aim is to become proficient in the word of God and for that to happen study methods should be more efficient. I also contend that to become proficient in the Bible, the method of study should also be more comprehensive. There should be careful scrutiny of the text, its contextual relevance, its message, and arising practical concerns. When all of these areas are addressed, then Bible study and exegesis is indeed ‘true to the word’.

I recognise that biblical exegesis is a fairly developed art for those in the academic and theological arena. Therefore, my hope is that this study will benefit especially the pastors, lay Bible teachers, and students of God’s word. When the Scriptures are carefully and comprehensively studied, then it is possible to really be ‘true to the word’.

Works Cited

Black, David Alan
1993 *Using New Testament Greek in Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House).

Broyles, Craig C.
2001 *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic).

Ehrman, Bart D.
2009 *Jesus, Interrupted* (New York: Harper One).

Fanwar, Wann M.

2007 'Narrative Artistry in Genesis 12-50: A Conceptual Approach.' *Catalyst* 2:14-31.

2009 'The Case of Three Brothers: Biblical Reflection on Leadership.' *Catalyst* 4:23-28.

Gugliotto, Lee J.

2000 *Handbook for Bible Study* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association).

McMinckle, Marvin A.

2001 *Living Water for Thirsty Souls: Unleashing the Power of Exegetical Preaching* (Valley Forge: Judson Press).

Ng, Kah Seng

1989 *S E A R C H: An Exegetical Process in Sermon Preparation* (Silang, Philippines: AIIAS Publications).

Sailhamer, John H.

1992 *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan)

Stuart, Douglas

1984 *Old Testament Exegesis: A Primer for Students and Pastors* (Philadelphia: Westminster).

Wenham, Gordon J.

1994 'Genesis 16-50.' *WBC* 2 (Dallas: Word Books).

About the author

Assistant Professor Dr. Wann Fanwar is a Principal Lecturer in the Faculty of Religious Studies at Asia-Pacific International University and has written several articles in *Catalyst*.