

A Beginner's Guide to Exegetical Research Resources

“Exegesis” is simply a technical term meaning the analysis of a text (usually a biblical text). Professors often will have specific instructions for their exegetical papers, especially at the introductory course level (where many students might not have encountered the term before). In general, though, most of these papers will share some common characteristics. Most will not require a thesis statement; rather, they will evaluate a text (“pericope”) according to a number of criteria (usually textual/structural, historical/cultural, literary, and theological). More information about how to approach the **writing** of exegetical papers can be found on the Writing Center’s website (<http://www.cst.edu/writing-center/writing-at-claremont/kinds-writing-assignments/>), and in a number of handouts available at the Writing Center.

A good approach when doing **research** for an exegetical paper is to begin with the more general research sources, and proceed to the more specific. The suggestions put forward here are not intended to be exhaustive; they are merely meant as a starting point for students who may not have had to research these types of assignments before.

Unless you are doing your own translation of the text (which most people writing their first exegesis are not!), it’s a good idea to start by reading your pericope in several (at least three or four) different translations. (There are many different translations available in the reference section of the library (first floor), as well as online – www.biblegateway.com is one option.) Remember that translation is not an exact science, and every translation involves some element of interpretation – where there are ambiguities in word meaning or uncertainties about grammatical nuances, you might very well find differences in translation, and this will be something you may want to address in your paper. If you speak/read languages other than English, feel free to look at translations in those languages as well; just remember that you will have to translate those versions into English yourself in order to explain any translational differences in your paper.

Once you have read several versions of your passage, **biblical encyclopedias and dictionaries** are good places to begin your research. Some useful examples include the **Anchor Bible Dictionary**, **New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible**, **HarperCollins Bible Dictionary**, **Eerdmans’ Dictionary of the Bible**, **The Encyclopedia of Religion**, etc. (these can all be found in the reference section of the library). These resources will have entries on just about any topic mentioned in the Bible (books, major characters, geographic locations and landmarks, religious practices, etc.; *Anchor Bible Dictionary* even has an article on “Exegesis” that you might find useful!). These articles often have bibliographies which can direct you to further avenues of research. The authors of the articles are often named, so when you are citing the articles, the authors should be identified. (Remember that encyclopedia and dictionary articles should be cited in your footnotes when needed, but they are generally *not* included in your bibliography.) The information in encyclopedias and dictionaries may be somewhat dated (ABD, for instance, was published in 1992), but it provides a solid, broad overview of accepted scholarship on a topic, and provides a good starting point for further exploration.

Even if you are not familiar with the original Biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek), it is possible to use the **Theological Dictionary of the New Testament** (also found in the reference section) to do some word studies. Unlike the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (which requires that you know some Hebrew to use it), the *TDNT* contains a scriptural index in volume 10. (Although the title refers to the *New Testament*, the index contains references to the *Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures* as well.) By looking up the verses of your pericope in the index, you will be able to see all the places in the *TDNT* where your passage is mentioned. Since you are not able to look up specific words, you will likely find that some of the references are not particularly pertinent or helpful – but occasionally you will find invaluable information about how certain key terms in your passage were used or understood in biblical times and writings.

Commentaries, each of which focuses on a single book of the Bible, are more specific and more in-depth than the encyclopedias and dictionaries. Commentaries can be found either as single volumes (e.g. **The Women’s Bible Commentary**), multi-volume sets (e.g. **The Interpreter’s Bible** or **The New Interpreter’s Bible**), or volumes in a series (e.g. **The Anchor Bible Series**, **Berit Olam**, **The Forms of the Old Testament Literature**, **Hermeneia**, **The JPS Bible Commentary**, **The Old Testament Library**, **Word Biblical Commentary**, etc.). Many of the commentaries can be found in the reference section of the library, but some of the volumes can be found in the stacks (and therefore can be checked out of the library!) as well. Different commentaries will often exhibit different “slants”: for instance, *The Women’s Bible Commentary* will present a feminist approach to the texts, *Berit Olam* and *The JPS Bible Commentary* will have a Jewish perspective, etc. Some commentary series will have more than one volume on a single biblical book, as the series continue to be updated; the newer volumes often have different authors, and are not simply “revised” versions of the older volumes, so it’s a good idea to look at both versions. Commentaries generally have an introductory section, which presents information on the historical and cultural background of the text, discussions of structure and genre, textual concerns, etc., followed by a verse-by-verse analysis of the text itself. A good strategy when researching exegetical papers is to read the introductory/background section, and then proceed to the analysis of your chosen text (in other words, you don’t have to read the entire book). Since different commentaries will have different emphases, it’s a good idea to look at several (at least three or four).

More focused and specific research can be found in the books in the library stacks. Each biblical book has its own section in the stacks; an easy way to find the section you need is to use the name of your book (e.g. “Genesis”) as the search term in the library’s BLAIS catalog. This will give you a ridiculously large number of results (a search using the keyword “Genesis” generated 3,577 titles), but you will notice that many of the titles will be clustered around a single call number – that is where you will find most of the relevant books on your subject (most will be found on the second floor). Many of these books will have a narrower focus than the commentaries, concentrating on specific themes or sections of the text; some will be useful for your specific pericope, while others will not. A quick look at the shelves will help you decide which books might be relevant for your exegesis.

The most current research will be found in journal articles. Many of these can be found using the library’s searchable databases. Some of these articles will be available as PDF files online; others you may have to find in the library’s journal collection. If you are unable to locate an article either online or as a hard copy, you may also request it via interlibrary loan.

(In addition to these suggestions, remember that most of these resources will also have their own bibliographies, which will help direct you towards additional relevant research on your topic.)