

A Handbook to
Old Testament Exegesis

William P. Brown

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Preface and Plan

All too often exegesis is taught as a series of discrete analytical techniques designed to help the interpreter “unlock” the text’s meaning. But this is not how exegesis, biblical or otherwise, works. Moreover, there is nothing particularly transformative about an exegetical framework that has more to do with merely explaining the biblical text than with exploring its various capacities for meaning. If isolated from the broader activity of theological inquiry and self-critical reflection, biblical exegesis fails to be a sustaining discipline in the practice of ministry. The need remains for an exegetical guide framed by a hermeneutic of wonder, a generative and generous hermeneutic that explores the text’s “wondrous depths” (*mira profunditas*) in community.

While the teaching of biblical exegesis remains foundational in theological education today, it is also ripe for reenvisioning, particularly as the need for greater integration is felt in the theological curriculum. In addition to the practical and curricular reasons, the motivation behind this project also has its theoretical underpinnings, among them: (1) the explosion of methods beyond the “analytical” approaches that have held sway in biblical scholarship; (2) the dismantling of the interpreter’s “objective” position vis-à-vis the biblical text; (3) the multiple roles that context plays at every level of interpretation; and (4) the rise of biblical reception history as a way of reconceptualizing the interpretive enterprise, from text-criticism and translation to modern commentary and artistic use.

All these reasons for reenvisioning exegesis boil down to how the biblical text itself is viewed, not as a static entity whose meaning is fixed but as a lively partner in dialogue with readers in dialogue with each other. A hermeneutic of wonder (see chap. 1) views the biblical text as inexhaustible in its depth and incalculable in its breadth of contexts. The emphasis falls not so much on what the text *is* but on what it can *do* (see Breed 2014, 117). Read and interpreted, texts are productive. Readings (re)organize texts as much as texts (re)orient readers. The dialogical dynamic of reading texts with others invariably generates a plurality of outcomes. Accounting for interpretive differences should be a fundamental task of biblical exegesis.

The aim of this handbook is to develop a fresh, example-filled introduction to exegesis of the Hebrew Bible that brings together various exegetical perspectives (methods, criticisms, reading strategies, etc.) in a way that cultivates the reader’s curiosity, critical engagement, and empathic imagination. As they currently stand, exegetical introductions

basically fall into two camps: (1) handbooks focused primarily on analytical modes or “tools” of exegesis and (2) surveys of various methods operative in biblical scholarship. The first camp is too limited in its focus, and the second often remains detached from the student’s hands-on engagement. Exegesis is a practiced art, a learned craft, and teaching it involves much more than presenting a survey or providing tools and techniques.

By addressing more explicitly the various capacities of the biblical text for meaning, capacities that become evident when the text is read in various contexts, exegesis is able to host an enlivening, ever-broadening conversation among diverse readers. Generative dialogue with the text should naturally lead to generative dialogue with others regarding the text, including those who view the text quite differently. In other words, dialogue with others about the text is integral to one’s own dialogue with the text. The two are not to be isolated. Put another way, the reader’s sense of *wonder of the text* naturally leads to *wondering about the text* with others. This is not to say that the text can simply be conformed to the reader’s expectations, but it does affirm that the text can mean more than one thing when read in community.

Exegesis, in short, should foster an expectancy of surprise. Broadly speaking, this handbook aims to reframe exegesis in order to facilitate more generative, if not transformative, encounters with the text and with others around the text. Since wonder is a sustaining force in theological inquiry and ministerial practice (Barth 1979, 63–73), fostering imagination and resilience (Sinclair 2014), it should also be a sustaining force in exegetical study, fostering lively curiosity, critical engagement, and imaginative reflection. Wonder, I am convinced, is integral to the careful and creative work of exegesis, for wonder is the “*eros* of inquiry” (Miller 1992, 15, 53), the enlivening, expectant journey toward discovery and transformation, the *eros* that leads to *caritas* (Scarry 1999, 81; Davis 2007, 40). Exegesis is both a tremendous responsibility and an incredible joy, a praxis most fully realized in community. Exegesis should model such open, wonder-driven inquiry as it facilitates the necessary movement from text to table.

FOR THE INSTRUCTOR

This book is designed to be a resource for the teaching and learning of exegesis. Because it is a handbook for beginning students and not a technical introduction to biblical hermeneutics, it is meant to be practical. That means that this book tries to provide enough background without saying too much theoretically. Freedom is left for the instructor to build upon, comment on, bypass, or disagree with what is discussed. No doubt the instructor will deem certain chapters insufficient given one’s own expertise. This book is simply an enabling introduction, not a comprehensive one. There are many gaps; other chapters need to be included.

In addition, I suspect that not all chapters will be deemed equally useful or important by the instructor and, for that matter, by the student. They are written so that the instructor can profitably skip some chapters, such as the one on translation (chap. 4), which presupposes a rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew. Nevertheless, even for an English-based exegesis class, this chapter can still be profitably read. (All Hebrew references are transliterated.)

This handbook is both theoretically conversant, but not technically so, and practically oriented, but not exhaustively so. There are several introductions that attempt some level of theoretical comprehensiveness and diversity, with each essay written by a different author. This book is not an edited collection of methodologies. Instead, it is written by one person, but I have written it in consultation with others whose specific expertise far exceeds my own. This, I hope, provides some measure of cohesion across the various approaches discussed. The trade-off, of course, is that the handbook is not as diverse as one might hope, including myself.

PLAN

This handbook is a show-and-tell book, or better, tell-and-show. It is structured such that each chapter introduces and discusses a distinctive approach to biblical exegesis and then shows how it might work with various texts, including two common texts. Together, these chapters form an expanding narrative of discovery and practice. To achieve that, the book is organized around four sequential steps: (1) Getting Started, (2) Analytical Approaches, (3) Readings in Place, and (4) Communication. “Getting Started” enables readers to identify their own hermeneutical context and to articulate first impressions about certain biblical texts prior to analytical study. “Analytical Approaches” employs the various tools and practices of exegesis, including translation for those who know Hebrew and certain critically based—some would say “classical”—methods. “Readings in Place” explores particular self-identified contextual approaches, from feminist to ecological, including theological interpretation as a culminating, integrative step. Last, “Communication” focuses on the necessity of communicating the results of one’s exegetical work, such as in the form of a sermon or lesson plan, within a particular context, namely, a community that also needs to be “exegeted.”

One innovation of this handbook is its focus on the reader’s self-understanding and experience as an exegete. A chapter is dedicated to helping readers see themselves as a bona fide exegetes equipped with various interpretive lenses and self-critical capacities (chap. 2). Readers are invited to respond to a series of questions regarding their own personal, cultural, and theological backgrounds. This step is meant to help readers articulate the hermeneutical perspectives that help determine what each one looks for and finds meaningful in the text and why.

A core conviction is that as exegetes are multifaceted in their individual approaches to biblical interpretation, so the biblical text is multivalent when it is read and interpreted in the company of others. By exploring various ways of interpreting the text that emerge from different social locations (“places”), the beginning exegete will become aware of the wide range of readings that are possible, depending on the questions posed and the perspectives adopted, and be able to engage them dialogically and self-critically.

Every chapter contains a series of questions that highlight the distinctive aims and accents of a particular exegetical perspective or reading strategy, accompanied by discussion and concluding with specific examples of practice. Various biblical texts are featured to illustrate how they “work” from a particular interpretive perspective or analysis. Another innovation is that two common texts are explored in every chapter. While a variety of

biblical texts are covered in the handbook, each chapter concludes with a (re)examination of two common texts: Gen. 1:1–2:4a and Gen. 2:4b–3:24. After much deliberation, I chose these two texts because they well accommodate each and every method discussed. In addition, they were selected because of their contrast in content and style, as well as their interrelatedness and contemporary significance. They serve as the connecting thread throughout the handbook. Finally, each chapter concludes with a bibliographical list of works, both cited and consulted, and recommended resources for further study.

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PART I

Getting Started

A Hermeneutical Adventure

What we observe is not nature in itself,
but nature exposed to our method of questioning.
*Werner Heisenberg*¹

Reading can be a sublime and complex process.
*Renita J. Weems*²

The early rabbis commended the study of Scripture in no uncertain terms.

Study it, study it—for everything is in it! Examine it diligently until you are worn out with old age by it, and do not be distracted from it; you could have no better measure than it. (*Mishnah 'Abot 5:22*)

The verb translated here as “study” (*vhp*) literally means “turn,” as if to say that the Bible is a finely crafted jewel that, when carefully turned, sparkles with the light of incomparable wisdom, the sum total of truth. But the metaphor is also apt in another sense. In the practice of Bible study, “turning” not only involves the text; it also involves the interpreter. Interpreting the text entails “turning things over in one’s mind,” from conjectures to new perspectives, from fresh questions to surprising conclusions. Interpreting the Bible requires discipline and focus, on the one hand, and pondering and creativity, on the other. It invariably involves change, “turning.”

Welcome to the exciting world of biblical interpretation, a world that is expanding at an accelerated rate! Biblical interpretation today covers a dizzying array of methods, orientations, and strategies—the various “angles” from which the biblical text is viewed and the various ways it is understood and lived out by readers. When a single biblical text meets differently situated readers, it is hard to predict what will happen. The reason is that textual meaning is never fixed. Meaning is not something contained within the text, as if it were waiting to be unlocked and released from literary confinement. Meaning,

1. Heisenberg 1962, 26.

2. Weems 1991, 59.

rather, emerges from one's encounter with the text. It is evoked within the interactive space between reader and text. Meaning is relational. When a book falls from the shelf and lands with its pages wide open but no one is there to read it, does it convey meaning?

Truth be told, a reader is required for a text to be meaningful. By itself a text contains merely marks on a page or pixels on a screen. It does not exist as meaningful without its readers. The text comes alive, as it were, when it is read (or heard or sung, etc.), whenever it is communicated or interpreted. In the encounter, the text becomes a partner in the construction of meaning. On the one hand, the text's meaning, when discerned for the first time, strikes the reader as something outside of the familiar range of experience. On the other hand, it is the reader who decides how the text is to be read (and communicated), like a musician playing from a score. Not unlike musical notations regarding tempo, phrasing, and volume, which determine certain parameters of a performance, there are textual signs and rhetorical conventions that cue the reader in the act of interpretation. Nevertheless, every reader creatively invests something of oneself in the interpretation of a text, in the "performance" of the text's meaning. While the relationship forged between a biblical text and a particular reader is unique and ever evolving, it is also a relationship worth sharing with others around the table.

TEXT TO TABLE: THE MINISTRY OF EXEGESIS

With respect to biblical study, the practice of interpretation involves something called "exegesis." The Greek term *exēgēsis* is derived from the verb *exēgeisthai*, which means "to lead out." Formally speaking, then, exegesis is about drawing meaning from the text. But in practice (and in principle), this is far more complex than what the term itself suggests. Although exegesis is a discipline, it is not a strictly objective one (and certainly not a disinterested one), for it necessarily involves the interpreter's active, creative, even intuitive work. While exegesis is a science that requires various tools of analysis, it is also something of an art that involves the interpreter's imagination and creativity. Perhaps it is best to say that exegesis is neither entirely a science nor an art. It is a craft, a learned discipline cultivated over time through practice and gained from considering the practice of others. Exegesis is a lifelong venture that carries the reader from the details of translation and analysis to the creative work of communication. Decisions—both judicious and speculative, careful and creative—must be made at every step along the way. Even the tedious work of translation requires imaginative effort as much as the creative work of communication requires focus and precision.

Exegesis involves listening. It treats the biblical text as a voice, albeit distant and foreign yet in full dialogical partnership with the reader. As with any new conversation, exegesis begins with introductions: the introduction of the text and the introduction of the exegete. That is why first impressions are important, although they may not be definitive in the long run when the dialogue often proceeds in unanticipated directions. Every exegesis begins with a guess or first impression and then concludes with validation or, more often, a change of understanding. The exegesis of the text also involves, necessarily so, an exegesis of the self. Like a conversation between two strangers, exegesis is all about

becoming a better listener, but not only of the text. Exegesis also involves coming to know yourself as an interpreter every time you engage the text and identifying the influences and interests that shape how you read texts. Finally, exegesis involves listening well to others at the table, a welcoming roundtable in which every seat is open and filled.

From start to finish, exegesis is a communal enterprise. You are not the first interpreter to work with a biblical passage. You follow countless other interpreters from generations past who have grappled with the text, some of whom have written about it. The commentary literature, both ancient and recent, is vast and available. Consider it a gift. Moreover, you have the privileged opportunity to work with others in dialogue, sharing your insights and listening to theirs. Do not take others for granted, especially when you are convinced that you are right about a biblical text. Often the best insights are recognized only after your own interpretive conclusions come to be questioned by others. Finally, for those who interpret texts for the sake of preaching, worship, or teaching, the community remains ever present in the mind (and heart) of the interpreter. Exegesis is inquiry in communion.

As you develop the craft of exegesis, you are entering a particularly exciting time in the history of biblical interpretation, a revolutionary time in fact, as is the case with other disciplines of inquiry. In act 2, scene 1, of the play *Legacy of Light* by Karen Zacarías, Dr. Olivia Hasting Brown addresses a group of Girl Scouts about her profession as an astrophysicist. She concludes with Einstein's discovery of relativity and what it reveals about the universe:

Suddenly you have a more chaotic, volatile universe; not a Puritan on a bicycle, but a Hells Angel on a Harley. Throw in the fact that the universe is still expanding and you have a complex, interconnected universe gunning on all cylinders and making one hell of a wheelie while barely respecting the dynamics of physical law. (Zacarías 2007, 65)

This riveting description of a dynamic universe applies well to the contemporary world of biblical interpretation. Exegesis too has become more volatile and complex, gunning on all cylinders and roaring forth in all directions.

A number of factors have contributed to such dramatic change: the shift away from apologetics toward a more open-ended and dialogical approach to Scripture, a move away from defending the Bible to bringing the Bible into honest conversation. Also, the world is changing, culturally, economically, and physically. As the world has become more globalized, so it has become more interconnected. More and more readers from diverse contexts are entering the "House of the Interpreter."³ That is to say, awareness of the multicultural community of readers has dramatically heightened within the last several decades. The assured results of exegesis of past generations are contested and destabilized by new generations of readers from various contexts. Voices long marginalized or silenced are being heard. Readers from across the global South and East are joining those from the North and West to sit at table together. The multiple ways of interpreting the

3. The reference is found in John Bunyan's Christian classic *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678); cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Pilgrim%27s_Progress.

biblical text reflect this growing diversity of readers, making every exegetical insight at once generative and provisional.

A cursory glance at the myriad approaches available today, from critical to cultural, literary to ideological, may seem overwhelming. But here we are, and jump in we must. Nevertheless, the active fray of exegesis need not be cause for bewilderment, but ultimately cause for wonder. If exegesis is fundamentally “reading seeking understanding” (cf. Acts 8:30), akin to Anselm of Canterbury’s definition of theology,⁴ then the joy of understanding, the excitement of new insight, and the thrill of new perspectives are more than simply by-products. For all its hard work, exegesis can be and should be an exercise of “inquisitive awe.”⁵

THE HERMENEUTICAL ADVENTURE

Exegesis is only the beginning; it marks the start of an adventure that interpreters, from biblical scholars to philosophers, have reflected on over the centuries. How does one arrive at meaning or gain understanding of a text? The structure of the journey is the stuff of “hermeneutics.” This rather technical-sounding name comes from the god Hermes, son of Zeus and the Olympian messenger known for his cunning, swiftness, and agility. In Greek mythology, Hermes delivered messages from the gods to mortals. Regarding the Bible, however, or any ancient text for that matter, the hermeneutical work of interpretation is neither swift nor cunning. Slow and stumbling are more like it. The text is never fully accessible; it will always be more than what we think we know about it. A historical and cultural chasm separates the modern interpreter and the ancient author, filled only partially (and sometimes erroneously) by the long and venerable history of interpretation. We cannot fully grasp what an ancient text said to its intended audience any more than we can transport ourselves back in time and conduct interviews.

Still, by attempting to peer across the hermeneutical divide, we can catch a glimpse of what the ancient text *could* have meant through language study (philology), literary analysis, historical research, and comparative work. Such lines of investigation help us to develop a matrix of possible meanings, some more plausible than others. But we can never overcome the hermeneutical divide; the full meaning of the ancient text remains ever elusive. When a telescope probes the night sky, it not only brings into view objects from great distances; it also looks back in time, measured in light-years. Given the great distances traversed by light, telescopes are the only time machines we have. The more distant the galaxy, the older and more obscure it is to the observer and the faster it is moving away. Such is the built-in limitation of sight, thanks to the finite speed of light. Similar is the limitation of hermeneutical understanding, thanks to the span of time and our own cultural distance. Call it the finite speed of life.

There is, moreover, something broader about the hermeneutical enterprise than simply determining what the text *could* have said in its earliest or originating contexts. If that

4. “Faith seeking understanding,” from *fides quaerens intellectum*, the original title to Anselm’s *Proslogion* as referenced in his preface. See Anselm 1998, 83–87.

5. My brief definition of “wonder.” See Brown 2015, 1–14.

were all there is to hermeneutics, biblical interpretation would be strictly a historical enterprise, an antiquarian's quest. For many of its readers, however, the Bible is more than an ancient artifact; it bears profound relevance, and in ways not necessarily reducible to author's original intent, however partially that can be "retrieved." What the text *means*, in other words, is as critical as what it once meant.⁶ Discerning the text's meaning includes interpreting the text in the light of one's experience and within one's community. One cannot interpret the biblical text without interpreting oneself and one's context.

While exegesis is a matter of best interpretive practices, hermeneutics is more theoretically oriented: it explores how the process of interpretation is to be understood. While this handbook is devoted primarily to the practical level of interpretation, some hermeneutical overview is needed. Interpretation, specifically exegesis, is "a practical skill," whereas hermeneutics operates more on the philosophical level (Conradie 2010, 298). For our purposes, we recognize that the act of interpreting Scripture is a peculiar one. It is different from interpreting other ancient (or modern) texts, for it requires more than simply studying from a distance, as if biblical texts were simply ancient documents housed in a stuffy museum. For communities of faith, biblical texts are considered authoritative and transformative. They teach and move people; lives are changed. They have relevance and currency. Walter Brueggemann talks of texts that "characteristically erupt into new usage" (2000, 1, 18). They "explode" with new meaning, propelled beyond the interpreter's own analytical or critical insight. Interpreting biblical texts requires creative and empathic imagination as well as analytical acumen and lexical proficiency. All together they help make the agile exegete.

Nevertheless, reading is not the only way biblical texts are interpreted. Biblical interpretation can take place in many ways and among various genres, such as liturgy, sermons, confessions, testimonies, sacraments, hymns, prayers, catechisms, testimonies, public speeches, films, media reports (Conradie 2010, 298). Biblical interpretation is going on all the time and all around, rightly or wrongly, for better or for worse. By necessity, the focus of this handbook is on the dynamics that unfold between text and reader, but even this narrow field of vision is filled, or (better) fraught, with background. In the encounter between text and reader, worlds intersect and sometimes collide.

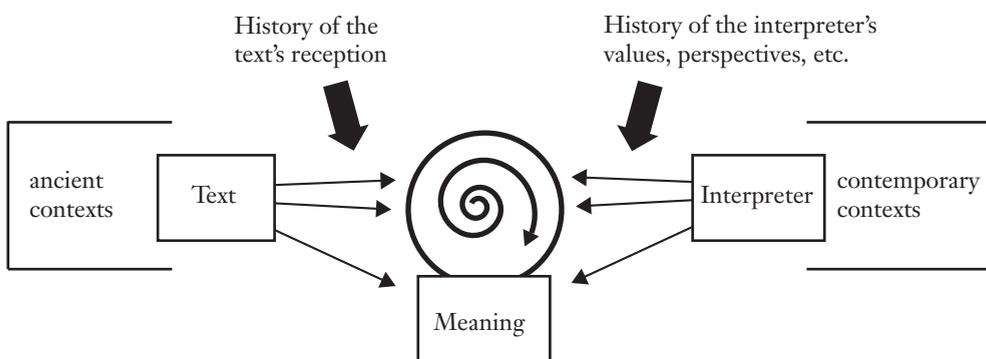
Drawing from the work of Paul Ricoeur, a French philosopher who had much to say about hermeneutics, one can speak of at least three worlds that interact in the encounter between text and reader: (1) the world behind the text, (2) the world in or of the text, and (3) the world in front of the text (see, e.g., Ricoeur 1976, 88, 92–94). The world "behind" the text refers to the historical context of the text's origin, retrieved through the work of historical investigation. The world "of" or "in" the text designates the text itself, disclosed through close readings. The world "in front of" the text includes the contexts in which the text is interpreted and appropriated, its history of interpretation or reception, including the world of the reader. That is to say, by reading the text you are making history!

Others refer to the "hermeneutical circle." Originally cast by Friedrich Schleiermacher and developed by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, the hermeneutical circle acknowledges the reader's investment in the construction of the text's meaning by highlighting the interplay between the whole and the parts in the eye of the interpreter.

6. See Stendahl 1962.

While one's understanding of the text as a whole is made possible only in relation to the text's individual parts, one's understanding of each part is gained in relation to the whole. The result is an unbroken circle of interpretation. The metaphor has also been used to include the ongoing interaction between the text, its context(s), and the reader, whereby the text is read and reread with new understanding. Some prefer to talk of a spiral rather than a circle (e.g., Schökel 1998, 74). Gadamer regarded interpretation as a "fusion of horizons" (1989, 306): the horizon of the past melding with that of the present, resulting in a creative synthesis. The thing about a horizon, however, is that as one is drawn to it, it continues to extend beyond one's reach. The hermeneutical journey is never ending.

Simply by scratching the surface, then, the hermeneutical process becomes complicated. Perhaps a diagram will help.



Simplistic as it is, the attempt here is to illustrate how the encounter between text and interpreter is one of mediated and interactive engagement. Call it a "hermeneutical convolution." A tidy circle this isn't. On the far left side, the ancient contexts, including that of the author and/or authorial community, constitute the world "behind" the text. On the far right side is the interpreter's world, the world "in front of" the text, including the interpreter's perspectives, values, cultural background, and so forth. The rotating circle, ever "turning" (!) in the center, illustrates the dialogical dynamic between text and reader, the "hermeneutical circle," if you will, in which the formation of meaning is ongoing, in which preunderstandings, critical examination, and new understandings all come to bear (see Conradie 2008, 107). Equally important is the fact that the circle in the center is supported and mediated by trajectories illustrating the history of the text's reception and the history of the interpreter's own perspectives and values. This is all to say that the text does not come to the interpreter unmediated but filtered and shaped by the text's own history from generation to generation and by the interpreter's own perspectives, values, and prejudgments.

FOR THE LOVE OF EXEGESIS

So much for the hermeneutical lay of the land. As the disciplined beginning point of interpretive inquiry, exegesis should not be encumbered with urgent and anxious expectations,

for example, that it will make you a better preacher or teacher. No doubt good exegesis will help. But there is something more fundamental and less functionalistic at work that sustains the best practices of exegesis. New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa puts it well:

[The] experiences of delight and wonder solve no doctrinal debate and settle no pressing question of polity. They fall alike on the just and the unjust, the novice and the scholar. They are not limited to believers, to be sure, but for believers they are occasions for enjoying not only language itself but [also] the God whose ways are revealed through that language. Failing to attend to the aesthetics of Scripture places the act of interpretation in jeopardy, since the text is not separable from its language and the multiple wonders of that language. (Gaventa 2007, 111)

Gaventa's plea to invigorate biblical exegesis with a sense of wonder addresses two broad hermeneutical issues: the aesthetics of the text and the self-critical awareness of the exegete. Viewing the text as an aesthetic expression of meaning "performed" in interpretive dialogue and communication, rather than as a repository of meaning to be drawn out once and for all, allows for a more transformative encounter with the text. An arresting piece of visual art, for example, draws the viewer in, engaging both intellect and emotion. In a moving piece of music, the listener loses self in the music's cadences and rhythms and at the same time attains a heightened level of awareness. Indeed, a work of art can inspire one's own creativity and imagination. So also does a text, particularly a biblical text. If the various perspectives, methods, and reading strategies practiced today, from the traditional to the ideological, from the analytical to the intercultural, can be framed as ways of exploring the text's aesthetic lure and versatility for meaning, as well as the interpreter's self-critical engagement, then the practice of exegesis will have a more sustaining, if not transformative, impact. Ultimately, I want to show how the practice of biblical exegesis can be part of the practice of ministry, a practice of empathy, wonder, and hospitality.

Good exegesis requires effort and discipline, yet it also requires delight and patience. If anything, exegesis requires a deliberate slowing down of the reading process, a reveling in the details and subtle nuances of the text, as well as a stepping back to ponder the forest and not just the trees. For the sake of transparency, I confess that my ecclesial tradition (Reformed) lifts up the enjoyment and glorification of God as the "chief end" of humanity (see the first question of the Westminster Catechism). Reading and interpreting Scripture is a part of that enjoyment, a transformative joy to be shared with others. When Scripture is read and communicated with understanding, clarity, and fresh relevance, such joy is beyond measure (see Neh. 8:12).

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Self-Exegesis

We are drenched in contexts.
*Kathleen O'Connor*¹

The Bible can never be read and interpreted impartially. Indeed, how can it be? By any definition, interpretation is a subjective activity. As the object of one's attention, the text as read and understood (or not) invariably reflects something of the reader's own perspective. Consequently, any full exegesis of the text requires, in some form or manner, an exegesis of the self. Exegesis is all about becoming a better reader not only of the text in all its otherness but also of the reader's subjectivity in all its familiarity. Hence, listen to yourself as you listen to the text. Become aware of your interpretive tendencies, and reflect on what might account for them as you engage the text. What do you typically listen *for* when you listen to the text, and why? Exegesis involves coming to know yourself as an interpreter as you engage both the text and the factors (personal, cultural, religious, etc.) that shape how you read.

This chapter marks the first step in the exegetical venture, but it is one that is frequently overlooked in practice. The initial step is to help you identify yourself as a bona fide exegete equipped with certain interpretive lenses. It is not an isolated step that, once taken, can then be discarded throughout the remainder of the interpretive process. No. It is a step meant to accompany every step in the exegetical process. The self-aware exegete is the exegete who can host an honest and open conversation with the text as well as with other interpreters of the text. The self-aware exegete is not a defensive interpreter. The self-aware exegete can identify his or her own tendencies to interpret a text in certain ways while remaining open to dialogue with others who may read the same text quite differently. The self-aware interpreter, finally, can appreciate how one's own understanding of the text has changed throughout the course of study and dialogue. The self-aware exegete is confidently self-critical.

To facilitate this initial step of self-awareness, I invite you, the reader, to respond to a series of questions listed below regarding your personal, cultural, and religious background.

1. O'Connor 1998, 324.

They are meant to help you identify how your background and current context(s) shape the way you approach the text. This “exegetical self-profile” draws its inspiration from Norman Gottwald’s “Student Self-Inventory on Biblical Hermeneutics,” whose aim is to “stimulate . . . students’ self-reflection on the ways they frame biblical interpretation” (1995, 251). The questions below are not as exhaustive as Gottwald’s, but the aim is comparable: to help you articulate your own interpretive perspective(s) based on your multi-faceted background and commitments. These questions should help you account for what you look for and find meaningful in the biblical text in light of your cultural, ecclesial, familial, and personal histories. Moreover, such a self-profile will help you enter into productive conversations with other interpreters. The text encountered by different interpreters, accompanied by mutual understanding of each other’s background and perspectives, invariably leads to genuine, if not transformative, dialogue.

The care you devote to developing your exegetical self-profile will reflect the care that you devote to exegeting the text. It is important to do so candidly and appreciatively, knowing that God is ever “at work in you” (Phil. 2:13; cf. 1:6). You are a work in progress, from your family of origin to your present commitments and convictions. Innumerable factors have come to play in your development, and this self-profile is a mere scratch on the surface of the *mira profunditas* (wondrous depth) that is you. You are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). Developing an exegetical self-profile acknowledges that. Read yourself with deep respect and an ongoing commitment to “know thyself.”

EXEGETICAL SELF-PROFILE

Try your hand at developing a self-narrative that addresses the following questions.

1. What is your family background ethnically, socially, and economically?
2. What was your first exposure to the Bible as you remember it, and in what context (e.g., home, worship, classroom)?
3. Is there a defining experience or event that has influenced the way you read Scripture?
4. How does your ethnic background and culture inform the way(s) you interpret Scripture? What has been your most meaningful experience of cultural diversity?
5. Does your gender inform the way you interpret Scripture? If so, how so?
6. How do your political views inform your biblical interpretation (or vice versa)?
7. What do you consider to be the most pressing social or ethical issue today? Is Scripture relevant to it?
8. What is your vocation or sense of call, and how does that shape the way you read Scripture?
9. What personal values direct your attention toward Scripture? Relatedly, what is your working theology as you read and interpret biblical texts?

Below are five exegetical self-profiles that address in narrative fashion and in varying degrees the questions given above. They are profiles developed by former students.² And, truth be told, one of the self-profiles is of me. They are offered not as models but simply as examples to encourage you on your way toward becoming a more self-aware exegete.

2. I thank C. G. Gim, Brandon Perkins, Kathryn Threadgill, and Claudia Aguilar for their contributions.

Exegetical Self-Profile A

I was born in mid-1970s near Seoul, South Korea, into my Christian family of origin. My older brother and I made our family fourth-generation Christians. This was a big deal because my paternal grandfather, who lived with us, and his brothers persevered in the face of persecution for believing in Christ. My father's side of the family is from parts of Korea that became North Korea after the (Korean) War, and for some time during and after the war, they were refugees in the southern part of the peninsula. Their very survival hung on their hope and trust in Christ, their strength and redeemer.

As such, I grew up learning that weekly corporate worship at church was more important than anything else. Serving God and others in and through our church life, even when physically sick, was considered the highest priority of our lives. Also, nearly all family gatherings—including gatherings for traditional holidays like *Choosuck*, or Harvest Festival, as well as for significant family events such as the memorial day of a relative—were centered on worship. This was our family culture.

At bedtime my mother regularly read Bible stories to us, and for several years we even had a daily family worship time reserved after dinner. So it was second nature for me to start reading the Bible around school age, though I did not understand many of the words. At first my curiosity in reading the Bible was to learn how to be a “good girl” that God would like and approve. I read the Bible literally.

In Korea, my parents were solidly middle class. Dad taught Western philosophy in a university, and my mother taught middle-school home economics. They strongly emphasized education for my brother and me, and this eventually motivated them enough to decide to immigrate to the United States when I was nine years old. As new immigrants in the suburbs of a Midwestern city in North America, my family became lower-middle class since my parents took minimum-wage jobs.

One might think that immigration would have been the major event that exposed me to cultural and ethnic diversity, but in college I became friends with other Asian Americans and became more aware of my own Asian-ness. My brother and I had attended public primary and secondary schools where over 95 percent of the students were Euro-Americans, and I only remember feeling vaguely anxious about how I looked different from most of my peers and wondering whether I would be better liked by boys if I were white.

My seminary places a heavy emphasis on social justice, and this has helped me to feel empowered to be an Asian American female. Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) has helped me understand further that I have the responsibility for feeling self-empowered, and that “the system” and “culture” are not the only principalities contributing to the way I have been experiencing the world. Moreover, I've come to understand that while I feel oppressed in some ways, I am also in a place of privilege as an educated, middle-class, Asian heterosexual woman.

These experiences have led me to seek a call in chaplaincy, the context in which I received pastoral care and grew in self-awareness. Now I read the Bible and view the world through the lens of pastoral care, including the domestic issues of immigration, as well as racial, gender, and sexual orientation inequalities. I look to God as one who empowers, supports, joins, and frees persons to regard themselves and others as God's creation and cocreators. I look to God as one who “disempowers” fear.

Exegetical Self-Profile B

I was raised in an upper-middle-class family in southern Arizona. My father was a university professor, and my mother stayed at home while my brother and I were growing up. My first real exposure to the Bible was in Sunday school, not at home. Although we regularly attended a Presbyterian congregation throughout my childhood years, we did not pray at mealtime or talk about matters of faith. That was left for church. In my sixth-grade confirmation class, I received a copy of the *Good News for Modern Man* version of the New Testament. Attracted to its accessible language, I eagerly read it and used it for personal devotions throughout my middle-school and high-school years as I became more active in the youth group at church. My love for Scripture and the church began to develop then, and I clearly read the Bible for answers and support during those tumultuous teenage years. At the same time, a deeper yearning to know and understand the ways of God in the world, as well as a thirst for knowledge about the meaning and purpose of life, was nurtured in my early reading of the Bible.

As a white male, I grew up in an insulated and privileged environment unaware of the prevalence of racial discrimination, sexism, and poverty. Being blind to these realities also blinded me from the ways Scripture addresses the interlocking realities of oppression. I read the Bible individually and “apolitically” for many years. My first experience with cultural diversity was becoming friends with an African American boy in my first-grade class. He and I regularly walked home together from school. I remember asking him, “Why is your skin black?” His response was immediate: “Because my mom and dad are black.” And we left it at that. Although it sounded like an innocent question of curiosity at the time, I have come to realize that such a question was asked from a position of white privilege: being black was an anomaly to me. Before long he and his family moved, which saddened me greatly. There is something of a counterpart to that experience that occurred many years later: I had the privilege of attending worship in a South African township. As I entered the congregation in a group of North Americans and Europeans, the Black pastor noticed us and said from the pulpit with his arms wide open, “Welcome home! Welcome to the birthplace of humanity!” I will always remember that.

Living in the arid Southwest is different from living in the deep South, where I currently reside, and yet social change was afoot everywhere when I was a teenager. I remember my father complaining of student riots at the university. My public schooling was predominantly Anglo by makeup, with some Hispanic representation. Spanish was the primary “foreign” language, which I learned but never achieved fluency. I do remember marveling over my third-grade Latina teacher sharing with us certain Latin-American customs of celebrating Christmas. Through her, cultural diversity became a matter of intrigue and wonder.

Educationally, I came to seminary with a strong background in science, and so learning theology and biblical interpretation was new to me. I had to learn, among other things, how to write essays. Throughout my theological education, I was never quite sure how to incorporate my science background. I’ve always appreciated how science is driven by a sense of wonder and curiosity about the world. Now I’m discovering ways in which science can deepen my theological reflection.

A crisis in my faith erupted when my brother was killed in a fluke accident when he was eighteen years old. “Why?” I cried out to God. I’ve yet to receive an answer. I do not believe it was God’s will to take my brother. After many years, the tragedy has brought my family closer. Today, as I deal with aging parents, I consider life to be a fragile, precious gift. These experiences have directed my attention particularly to the Psalms and the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, from which I gain much comfort and insight.

Speaking of Scripture, I see God’s preferential option for the poor strongly represented. I’m all for government efforts addressing the growing problem of economic inequality, which the church must also address more concertedly. In addition, environmental degradation of our planet is of great concern to me. I grew up in the glorious Southwest desert, but now the land surrounding my parents’ home is fully developed with cookie-cutter homes and condos. Because of urban sprawl, the desert I loved to explore at home no longer exists. I suffer occasional bouts of what some call “solastalgia” (Google it). My love of nature also directs my focus on Scripture.

Exegetical Self-Profile C

As I climbed into the fifteen-passenger van, I can remember thinking, “My family is so far from normal.” That is still the case. I was only eight years old and dressed in an elf costume that Mom had sewn. The truly embarrassing part was when Santa Claus got behind the wheel to drive us. For 364 days out of the year, he was simply “Dad,” but this one day each Christmas season our family dressed in costumes and delivered Christmas baskets to the underprivileged families of my father’s congregation. Seeing a Caucasian man in south Alabama—a commissioned lay pastor for thirty years in an African American congregation, now driving through the lower-income parts of town—baffled most people. Yet when they saw him dressed as Santa Claus with a van full of his mixed-race children dressed as elves and handing out presents, it is a wonder I am here to recount that experience.

I realized early on that there was nothing normal about my family. This is how I learned to interpret the Scriptures. The gospel was a social gospel: it called for liberation of and justice for the oppressed, the widow, the orphan. We were taught how to interpret the living Word for our lives with the practices of servant leadership exemplified in Christ. From the time we were small, I was Ruth, literally, gleaning in the farmers’ fields with Mom and delivering the produce to needy families in our community who could not otherwise afford fresh produce.

My parents were missionaries in the Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Dad was a history teacher and lay pastor; Mom was a registered nurse. While in the Congo, they adopted my oldest sister from Vietnam. They would go on to adopt ten other children and have two birth children of their own. I am number ten of the thirteen. I was adopted from South Korea when I was thirteen weeks old. My biological mother was Korean, and my biological father was an African American soldier. However, the only culture and heritage I know comes from Caucasian parents and mixed-race children growing up in the racist South. As Democrats, my parents shattered dividing walls of economic classes, social norms, race, and political views. My hermeneutical lens is completely

devoid of labels or normative boxes. As I interpret life and Scripture, there is but one essential identity: beloved child of God.

When I went away to a small conservative liberal arts college in the mountains, it was the first time I experienced blatant racism, sexism, and classism. My liberal stance with a social gospel interpretation was put to the test as I was challenged to know my role as a woman in the church. My Christian values of justice for the marginalized were challenged by a historical fundamentalist interpretation of Scripture. However, it brought forth an even greater awareness as I moved into my liberal progressive seminary, where I was deemed far more conservative than my classmates! Race continued to play a role in my first few weeks of seminary education as I was approached and asked to join the African American group on campus and then the Korean American group. I continued to baffle my peers as I talked about my white parents and my not-so-normal upbringing. In an institution striving for intentional diversity and inclusiveness, I learned to embrace my unique background and perspectives. I could not, for example, settle for many liberation theologies, which seemed only to perpetuate divisions. Instead, my hermeneutical lens was framed by a world that God created, where all parts fit together in a “luminous web,” as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, an undivided wholeness.

In my life and education, I have been blessed to encounter many different people from various walks of life, with unique stories and backgrounds to share. However, when my seminary sent me to Kikuyu, Kenya, for my church internship, the gospel truly became the living Word for my life. God’s grace became embodied in a woman with a story of faith that would alter my life forever. Walking home from church one night, she was robbed near a cornfield by two men. One of the men took out a machete and slashed her leg, which later become infected. Doctors called her family and told them to say their good-byes. Grace told me that she heard God’s voice explain to her that now was not her time to die. The next day her fever broke, and she recovered. Grace spoke of how she lived her life in loving service in response to the grace and mercy God had shown her. She told me this on the anniversary day of that horrific event. We gathered at my house and sang praises, prayed, and celebrated. Later that summer, I had the privilege of witnessing another amazing event in Grace’s life, her wedding day. “Surely the Lord has blessed me, beyond what I deserve or imagine,” Grace said as we delighted in the most colorfully festive wedding I had witnessed. It was then that Grace became a sister in Christ to me, a person marked by the very grace Christ offers to us all.

As Scripture interprets Scripture, as faith seeks understanding, as the living Word takes on flesh in Jesus Christ and is lived out in the body of Christ, my hermeneutical perspective opens me to infinite interpretations. It is a social gospel that knows no boundaries and seeks to build bridges in the grace and mercy given through Jesus Christ. And it calls me to walk humbly, to seek justice, love mercy, and listen to those whom God calls beloved children.

Exegetical Self-Profile D

I was raised in a lower-middle-class family in the “Buckle of the Bible Belt,” Nashville. My Bible-college educated father tried his hand at becoming a senior pastor before ultimately

holding numerous jobs ranging from serving as a corrections officer to becoming a long-bed truck driver. My mother, who has an associate's degree in accounting, worked as a bookkeeper and was a devoted Sunday school teacher. My father and mother made sure that my siblings and I knew the Bible before ever stepping into the church. Our breakfast and dinner table was not only filled with prayer but also punctuated with my father telling us stories from the Hebrew Bible to warn us about the sinful transgressions of our ancient Jewish ancestors.

As a child who had been brought up to revere the Bible as inerrant, I took its accounts of history and prophecies for the future as a matter of grave importance. I would pick up the KJV in the pew during Sunday service and begin reading the book of Revelation as a way to stay engaged during our long worship services. I had been told that this book laid out how God once and for all would rid the earth of evil. But Revelation scared the hell out of me, a nine-year-old at the time. From churches being spewed out of God's mouth, to a mark on a person's forehead, to the beasts of the sea, I recognized that the God of the Bible was not to be trifled with.

My fear-induced understandings of Scripture became tempered when I enrolled at Fisk University. In the Introduction to History course, I made the *fortunate* mistake of telling my professor during class introductions that I was a preacher, to which she replied, "You do know that the Bible is a book of social control?" I had no response that day because I felt as if she had insulted a member of my family. Over the next four years of study, however, I came to see how the Bible that we as a people love so much has been, is currently, and may very well continue to be used to sanction the oppression of the very folks who regard it as holy.

As a male I have come to understand that the Bible I was taught to revere so highly is replete with stories and patriarchal laws that, if taken literally, could negatively affect the well-being of my mother, grandmother, sisters, aunties, cousins, and so many other women that I know and love. When I still encounter pastors and leaders who want to hold women to the biblical mandates for modesty in their dress and silence in the pews, I shudder to think how many women throughout history have had to spend their lives swimming upstream to fight against these prescriptions. As a Black male who has been in church all his life, I have yet to see a female pastor question, let alone deconstruct, the relationship between the Bible and patriarchy.

My lower-middle-class background taught me that politically and theologically there was always value in hoping for a better tomorrow. When voting for the first time in 2008, I cast my ballot for then Senator Barack H. Obama because his "change we can believe in" narrative was one that I had first grown to love through Scripture. I knew of a God through Scripture who promised time and again that our current situation in life would be made more beautiful and more abundant if we would only follow this God.

As a millennial I have grown increasingly distressed at the mistreatment that youth and young adults in general and Black youth in particular suffer. Seeing youth discriminated against, such as Ahmed Mohamed because of his religious identity, and lamenting over Michael Brown and Renisha McBride, who were killed in part because of their kissed-by-the-sun embodiment, I turn back to the Bible and ask God, "What do you have to say about this?" In my distress I look for answers and comfort from the book that first

introduced me to a loving God. I see a God through Scripture who repeatedly is said to come to the aid of Her children when they are crushed by empires and principalities, and this gives me comfort and hope. But such comfort is always short lived, because the Scriptures that remind me of this God of comfort are the same Scriptures that point only to hope and not to reality.

As a preacher, Christian educator, and emerging religious ethicist, I continue to look to Scripture to find good news for those engaged in the struggle for justice. The good news that I thought was once self-evident in Scripture is now harder to come by. The narratives contained within this sacred book have the potential to do immense damage to persons and communities if we are not careful to consider the complexity of their theological claims within their particular sociological worldviews. I have no choice, therefore, but to wrestle with Scripture. I am committed to this wrestling because I believe that the good news of our God can be found in those ancient words when we are daring enough to engage wholly with Scripture, to critique it when necessary, and to utilize it in connection with the vast lexica of human experience. Then and only then will the oppressed and oppressor be able to sit together and hear Scripture proclaimed and to reply in unison, "Thanks be to God!"

Exegetical Self-Profile E

My encounters with the Bible have always been through the eyes of two cultures: I grew up in a Roman Catholic family, but my mother was forced to convert to Roman Catholicism in order to marry my father, and her Baptist background never left her. I grew up in Mexico City, one of the largest cities in the world, with all the beauty and problems that a big city has, but spent long periods of time in rural Sonora, the state where my extended family still resides. I lived in Mexico City until my midtwenties, but have lived in the American South for almost a decade. My readings are always bicultural and always bilingual, from a place of exile.

My exegetical lenses have been formed over generations. My family's history influences my reading of the Bible just as much as my individual history. For at least three generations my family has been engaged in revolutionary movements seeking social justice. My family knows that the status quo is not what God intends. While I grew up in a loving family in an upper-middle-class environment, attending private schools and having every basic need provided for, my parents grew up surrounded by physical abuse, persecution, and extreme poverty. I cannot read the Bible without thinking about my mother being mocked and beat up for being the illegitimate child of a Protestant single mother, or the calluses that my father developed from walking barefoot for miles every day in order to go to school in the desert, or the many meals both of them missed while growing up. To me, the poor are always at the heart of the gospel.

In my current context, the poor and marginalized are often people of color. Living in Atlanta has opened my eyes to the difficult and complex realities of racism in this country: it permeates economics, politics, transportation, housing, access to food, pedagogy, and every sphere of life. And when you are the majority, you are mostly blinded by it. I know because it happened to me. It took me a long time of living in a foreign land and becoming

a minority, “the other,” to see the systems from which I was benefiting, the discrimination that happened right in front of my eyes, and the cultures of oppression that my privilege helped perpetuate in Mexico, where I was the majority. Suddenly my eyes were opened to see the indigenous people whose lives depend on one crop, the disabled who struggle to access buildings and buses, the families living on landfills, the corruption that has become part of our ethos, the erosion of mountains, the pollution of lakes, and the cloud of smog that paints my hometown gray. Now my call is to encourage others in my context to open their eyes to the realities that surround them.

INVITATION

We do not come to the Bible as blank slates. We are shaped decisively by our backgrounds and experiences, by our commitments, communities, and convictions—theological, political, and personal. Our various backgrounds may not mean much when we read a stop sign and understand its implications for driving, but they matter greatly when we read something as profoundly deep and powerfully life-transforming as Scripture. What is your exegetical self-profile? To be self-aware as an exegete is to be more aware of Scripture’s impact upon you and your impact upon its meaning.

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First Impressions

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from. . . .

*T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"*¹

Now that you have taken the time to “exegete” yourself, you are ready to begin the journey of biblical exegesis, to begin to “listen” to the text. Exegesis invariably slows down the process of reading so that a substantive dialogue between you and the biblical text can unfold. Such dialogue involves asking questions. Think of exegesis as an interview process, yet one whose outcome can never be fully predicted. Any exegetical perspective should be open to surprise. The steps discussed in this handbook should be viewed not as prescribed rules to be mechanically followed but as guides to posing questions and pursuing possible lines of inquiry. Imagine exegesis as a map of possible pathways in and through the text’s rugged, fertile terrain. But exegesis also invites readers to blaze new trails, asking new questions not thought of before and making new discoveries. By any measure, exegesis is an adventure that begins with an initial encounter filled with first impressions and questions and concludes with knowing the text well enough that you can effectively communicate its meaning(s) in a variety of contexts. The best exegetes are the agile exegetes who recognize the text’s versatility in the construction of meaning. They know that for every end there lies a new beginning in the exegetical journey.

In view of its intended audience, this handbook aims to help the reader reach a critically informed and theologically generative understanding of the text that is relevant to the ongoing work of preaching and teaching, which feeds back into the ongoing work of exegesis. One specific goal is to discern and communicate a message from the text for a particular occasion and context, a word for “such a time as this,” rather than to establish a once-and-for-all-time meaning of the text. The aim of communication is to offer a *timely* word, not necessarily a timeless word. I usually cringe, for example, when I read through

1. <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/winter/w3206/edit/tseliotlittlegidding.html>.

an old sermon of mine on a particular biblical text. For a new context, including my own, I invariably look at the text with new eyes and discover new meaning. We can never exhaust the meaning of the text. To think otherwise would be to “tame” the text, to lock it in a box and keep the key. “Exegesis does not allow us to master the text so much as it enables us to enter it” (Hayes and Holladay 2007, 22).

This brief chapter encourages you to describe your initial “entrance” into the text, to open the door and linger at the threshold instead of charging in armed with your analytical tools and methodologies ready to deploy. Before turning to issues of translation, form, genre, and other critical approaches, take time simply to read Gen. 1:1–2:4a in the version with which you are most familiar. After reading this first creation account, consider the following seven sets of questions (an appropriate number for Genesis), questions that can be applied to any biblical text.

1. What seems most familiar about this text? Can you recall a time and place in which you encountered this text before? If so, how do you remember the text?
2. What struck you as new, unfamiliar, or surprising about the text? Are there problems of intelligibility or questions of understanding that emerge as you read the text? What would you like to know more about the text?
3. Do you notice any gaps in the text? What do you see as gaps between the text’s world and yours?
4. What about the text speaks to you most meaningfully? What do you find objectionable? Do you find yourself reading with or against the “grain” of the text? Do you see yourself as an “outsider” or an “insider” vis-à-vis the text? Why?
5. Do you see anything going on “between the lines” of the text? Can you imagine any subtexts within the text?
6. State in two or three sentences what you consider to be the central message of the text. Was that easy or difficult to do?
7. Finally, compare your version of the text with another translation that you are not so familiar with. (If you know another language, try reading the passage in that language.) Note any discrepancies between them (e.g., 1:1, 26–28; 2:1–3). How do they change or question the way you understand the text?

After you have completed this series of questions for Gen. 1:1–2:4a, do the same for Gen. 2:4b–25. There are no right or wrong ways of responding to these questions. They are simply meant to begin a dialogue with two biblical texts. How you answer them indicates your first impressions before you begin the work of translating the Hebrew, and in any relationship such impressions can change over time. You will have opportunity to reassess them as you move toward posing new questions and reaching new conclusions. Change is expected. Shift happens. Welcome to the exegetical adventure!

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