Writing the Exegetical Paper
IBSL510A – Howard
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An exegetical paper provides one answer to the question, “What is this text about?” In the paper, you will construct an argument to answer that question; that is, you will make a claim about the text (i.e., your thesis statement) and then provide evidence to support that claim. You will draw that evidence from the work you do in the process of exegesis, including your own rhetorical analysis of the text, your assessment of the historical and literary contexts of the text (conducted with the help of secondary sources), and the comments and analyses published by other scholars and preachers.

Writing an exegetical paper is, to some extent, an academic exercise; I doubt you will ever be asked to write one outside seminary or academia. At the same time, exegetical papers are an important part of any pastor’s formation. These papers nurture skills for crafting an argument, and almost everything you write, be it a sermon or a stewardship campaign letter, will require the crafting of an argument. These papers also allow you to hone your interpretive skills; they let you linger in the text before jumping to the theological “take-away” that most sermons require. In an exegetical paper, you make a claim about the text. In a sermon, the text makes a claim on you.

While the genre of the exegetical paper is not a common one outside seminary work, both the process of exegesis and its fruits constitute part of the weekly routine of proclaiming the word of God to the people of God. In parish work, you will take the skills and strategies you develop in your biblical studies classes at seminary and adapt them to meet the needs of your day-to-day study of Scripture.

Remember that an exegetical paper is the culminating product of the process of exegesis. The process of exegesis is described in multiple iterations in Douglas Stuart’s Old Testament Exegesis and other books. Once you have decided on a passage for your exegesis and paper, you should undertake the process as described in chapter 1 of Stuart’s book, skipping over the parts that involve Hebrew if you do not know the language. Once you have proceeded through the steps of exegesis, organize your work into a well-crafted essay. For the purposes of this course, an exegetical paper is not a place to dump everything you’ve learned about a given text. Instead, it is a structured argument that describes your discovery of what the text is “about.” Not everything you learn about the text during the process of exegesis will be relevant to your paper’s argument.
Structure of the Exegetical Paper

I. Introduction: Make a claim. You will also need to find space in the introduction or at the beginning of the body to defend the limits of your passage. You will also explain any translation choices that may be important to your understanding of the passage but that do not directly provide evidence for your claim. (For example, if you are following the NRSV but changing a word or two, be sure to explain that. If you write your own translation or you are deviating significantly from a published translation, attach a copy of your translation as an appendix to your paper.)

II. Body: Support the claim with evidence. You will want to attend to your textual (i.e., rhetorical) analysis, the historical and literary contexts of the passage, and any other significant evidence gleaned from your research.

III. Conclusion: Summarize the claim and its evidence. You may also wish to make a brief comment in this section about the theological application(s) of your work.