

Old Testament Exegesis at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

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Three books of the Old Testament are studied exegetically at WLS, Genesis, Psalms and Isaiah. Because of the intensive nature of exegesis, none of these rather long books can be exegized in its entirety, in spite of the fact that an entire year is spent on each.

The courses are these:

Juniors

1st Quarter—Genesis 1-3; 2 hrs

2nd Quarter—Genesis 4-11:26; 2 hrs

3rd Quarter—Genesis 11:27-25:11; 3 hrs

Middlers

Each Quarter—Selected Psalms; 2 hrs

Seniors

Each Quarter—Isaiah 40-66; 2 hrs

Under the heading **Biblical Theology (Exegesis)** the seminary *Catalog* states:

Thorough, intensive, and reverent study of the Holy Scriptures is the very heart of our Seminary training. No one can be a God-pleasing witness of Christ unless with a believing heart he fully understands the whole message which our God and Savior would have us proclaim to sinful men for their salvation now and hereafter.

Certain books of the Bible are taught with special thoroughness in the courses in Biblical interpretation (Exegesis). In this study every word, phrase, and sentence is thoroughly examined on the basis of the original Hebrew and Greek texts. Intensive language study during his college training has carefully prepared the seminary student for this work. A course in the interpretation of both an Old and a New Testament book is given in each of the three Seminary years (p 23).

It should be explained that the remaining books of the Old Testament are covered in a more cursory way in the courses in Old Testament isagogics. These are offered to Middlers and Seniors in the following courses:

Middlers

1st Quarter—Pentateuch; 3 hrs

2nd Quarter—History of OT Criticism, Joshua and Judges; 3 hrs

3rd Quarter—Books of Samuel and Kings; 3 hrs

Seniors

1st Quarter—General Introduction to the OT, Poetical Books; 3 hrs

2nd Quarter—Major Prophets; 3 hrs

3rd Quarter—Minor Prophets; 3hrs

The *Catalog* explains that in these isagogics courses emphasis is laid upon becoming acquainted with the line of thought in these books. The courses also cover what is known about the inspired writers and the time

and circumstances of their writing. The formation of the Old Testament canon and the transmission of the original text are also treated. The historical-critical method of Bible interpretation is discussed as well.

To facilitate the students' work in Old Testament exegesis the Juniors take a one-quarter course in advanced Hebrew grammar. A one-quarter course in hermeneutics introduces them to the principles of interpretation that apply to the whole Bible, including the Old Testament. This course aims, among other things, to enable the student

1. To explain the scriptural presuppositions of faith which underlie the historical-grammatical method;
2. To explain the importance of and correctly use the historical setting, the grammatical setting, and the perfect unity of Scripture in interpretation;
3. To explain the proper roles of reason and faith in the interpretation of Scripture;
4. To know the unbelieving rationalistic presuppositions which underlie the historical-critical method; and
5. To identify and explain to lay people the subjective interpretations of the historical-critical method in both its radical and mediating forms (Self-Study, p 126).

In the seminary's May 1978 Self-Study the Old Testament department outlined the following department objectives:

To help the student

1. To gain an understanding of God's plan of salvation centering in the promise of the Savior and carried out through His special Old Testament people;
2. To gain an understanding of the Sinaitic Law covenant as a vital discipline for God's Old Testament people, serving and not displacing the Abrahamitic covenant of pure grace until its fulfillment in Christ;
3. To understand the establishment of the theocratic kingdom in the promised land of Canaan;
4. To grasp and appreciate the manner in which God kept alive the Messianic hope by the work of the Old Testament prophets;
5. To study intensively some of the basic books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Psalms, and Isaiah) in order to develop skill in interpreting the Old Testament on the basis of the original Hebrew text;
6. To become acquainted with the basic structure and line of thought of the remaining books of the Old Testament, and with what is known about the inspired writers and the time and circumstances of their writing;
7. To trace the history of the canon and the transmission of the Hebrew text and ancient versions;
8. To know and evaluate the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation (p 14).

In all the Old Testament exegesis courses the latest critical text, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, and the comprehensive Kautzsch-Cowley edition of Gesenius' *Hebrew Grammar* are used. The Brown-Driver-Briggs and Koehler Baumgartner Hebrew lexicons are recommended.

Turning now to the individual courses, we note first of all that according to the description of the course in Genesis the section Genesis 1:1-25:11 "is unfolded as the primordial history of the kingdom of God (His reign of free and faithful saving grace), first in the entire original world, and then in the life and training of Abraham, the father and first patriarch of God's chosen Old Testament people" (Self-Study, p 116). The objective of the course is "thoroughly to comprehend the divinely inspired content of a vital portion of Genesis, which is in many respects basic for the understanding of the rest of the Pentateuch, of the Old Testament, and of the entire Holy Scriptures" (ibid).

The classroom procedure and instructional method are described as follows:

The first three chapters, and some subsequent portions, are covered by working with the class as a whole, so that any student may be called upon to translate portions of the Hebrew text under discussion and be asked to expand upon details of language and content, while the instructor gives the interpretation in depth. Emphasis is laid upon training students to begin the study of any portion of Scripture by listening, first of all, to the message of the original text with the aid of a comprehensive lexicon and grammar before consulting the interpretation of others, or even the various ancient and modern versions. In the second or third quarter certain portions of Genesis are assigned in advance to individual students or groups of students for the preparation of an exegetical paper. The student(s) meet(s) in consultation with the instructor for a thorough discussion of the portion. Subsequently, the students submit their presentation in written form with a bibliography for grading. Several examinations or essays on assigned topics are required. Grades are likewise taken on classroom work (ibid).

A change in instructors for this course has resulted in some changes for the second and third quarters, as I understand. Students are now given study questions to answer as they work through assigned portions of the text. For the course a wide range of commentaries and pertinent literature is recommended and made available on the library reserve and reference shelves for the students' use.

The Middler course in Psalms surveys the entire book but gives intensive exegetical study to a select number of representative Psalms. The following are the objectives of the course:

1. To help the student to become familiar with the contents of the Book of Psalms, and in particular with the Messianic prophecies in the book;
2. To inspire the student to appreciate and love the Psalter, the divinely inspired prayer book of the church;
3. To develop the student's skill in interpreting the Psalms on the basis of the original Hebrew text (ibid, p 119)

Introductory material to the entire book is discussed on the basis of duplicated notes. Then under the guidance of the instructor a careful, detailed exegesis of Psalms 1, 2 and 23 is developed in class. The students are expected to read and translate the Hebrew text and to look up the biblical references helpful for the interpretation. To develop their exegetical skill, they are involved in the exegetical process through questioning and discussion. Psalms 1 and 23 are memorized in Hebrew.

This is followed by a seminar in exegesis. For the seminar, students work in teams, studying the assigned Psalm first of all individually, then as a team. Each team prepares exegetical notes for the class, submits them to the instructor for review and then meets privately with him to discuss the Psalm. The approved notes are then duplicated and distributed to the class. Each team member serves as the discussion leader in his own section of the class, while the instructor serves as a resource person. One period is spent on each Psalm, the number of Psalms covered varying with the number of students in the class. Except for a core of especially important Psalms, the selection varies from year to year. The required written material includes:

1. An outline of the Psalm, including a theme;
2. Luther's summary of the Psalm;
3. The meter and parallelism of the Psalm;
4. A verse by verse exegesis, including a literal translation, vocabulary and word study, grammatical and exegetical notes, and Scripture references helpful for the interpretation;
5. A list of preaching values to be found in the Psalm.

After completion of the seminar, the instructor again leads the class into an exegesis of Psalm 22 and others chosen by the class. Periodic examinations are given. Two term papers are written on assigned topics. In the Senior course in Isaiah, chapters 40-66 are read in Hebrew. Special attention is given to the contents, grammar, syntax, and the doctrinal and possible homiletical value of the chapters read. The course objectives are as follows:

The student is to become acquainted with the gracious promises of God made to His people Israel through the great prophet Isaiah, the evangelist of the Old Testament.

He is to develop skill and competence in the exegesis of the Old Testament prophetic writings on the basis of the original Hebrew text.

He is to appreciate and understand the fulfillment of God's Old Testament prophecies in the life and work of Christ as detailed in the books of the New Testament (ibid, p 123).

The general outline of the course is:

The Future Glorification of the Church

1. The deliverance of God's Old Testament people from Babylon, chapters 40-48;
2. The deliverance of the whole world from the captivity of sin, chapters 49-57;
3. The spiritual and eternal deliverance, chapters 58-66 (ibid.)

The following description is given of the classroom procedure and instructional method:

Each chapter is read in shorter segments in the original Hebrew, is translated into English, and all verb forms are analyzed. Attention is called to any linguistic difficulties in the passage read, and its context is carefully noted and thoroughly discussed. Each quarter a short portion of a chapter is assigned to every student in the class for a class report, which is then discussed by the class and the instructor. Portions of the book not assigned for student class reports are treated in the same manner by the instructor (ibid.)

The following books are recommended to the students for reference:

Isaiah II, by August Pieper, translated by E.E. Kowalke

The Book of Isaiah, by Edward J. Young, Volume III

Exposition of Isaiah, by B.C. Leupold, Volume II

The Prophecies of Isaiah, by Keil and Delitzsch

Luther's Works, Volume 17, *Lectures on Isaiah*, Chapters 40-66

The courses in Old Testament exegesis at Immanuel Lutheran Seminary (CLC) in Eau Claire, Wisconsin are quite parallel to those at WLS. Bethany Lutheran Seminary in Mankato, Minnesota also has required courses in the exegesis of Genesis, Psalms and Isaiah, but the courses are only one semester in length.

For the Master of Divinity degree at Concordia, St. Louis, students are required to choose one three-hour course in Old Testament exegesis in each of the following areas of electives: Old Testament Torah or Writings, Old Testament Prophets. Students are not required to take courses requiring a knowledge of Hebrew. At Concordia, Fort Wayne, the only course in Old Testament exegesis that is required is a three-hour one-quarter course in Isaiah. Students may choose to take it on the basis of either the English or the Hebrew text. In other words, neither of the Concordia's any longer requires any work in Hebrew, although both offer many Hebrew electives.

Luther Northwestern (ALC-LCA) in St. Paul does not require a knowledge of Hebrew for entrance into the seminary but all students must take some Hebrew “for a better understanding of the Old Testament and its thought forms” (*Catalog*, p 64). A one-quarter three-hour course in Hebrew Fundamentals fulfills this requirement. A three-quarter three-hour course in Hebrew is a prerequisite for Hebrew exegesis courses. A course in the Pentateuch and a choice of two courses from the Prophets and the Writings are required, in other words, one year of Old Testament exegesis. This may be done on the basis of either the English or the Hebrew text.

Philadelphia Lutheran Theological Seminary (LCA) requires two one semester courses in Old Testament, one covering the Pentateuch and the other the Prophets and the Psalms. A knowledge of Hebrew is required, but neither of the courses could be considered comparable to the exegetical courses required at WLS.

Gettysburg (LCA) requires two courses in Old Testament isagogics but none in exegesis. Biblical languages are offered in a required one-month middle term between semesters in January.

These comparisons indicate that WLS stands virtually alone in what it requires of its students in the area of Old Testament exegesis, and especially exegesis on the basis of the Hebrew text. One wonders how long WLS will be able to maintain its standards. The reason we have been able to resist erosion, in the opinion of this observer at least, is the fact that the great majority of our students come from Northwestern College, our own synodical school, with its one-track pre-ministerial course, in which two years of Hebrew are a requirement. Missouri’s problem, it has been admitted now that it is too late, is that it converted its single-track, single-purpose pre-ministerial colleges into general colleges with a much broader purpose. The enrollment of pre-ministerial students in them has plummeted, with the result that the students entering its seminaries no longer come largely from its own colleges. These graduates of various public and private universities and colleges do not bring with them to the seminary the language training those entering St. Louis at least once had.

Noting the doctrinal deterioration in other Lutheran church bodies, one can’t help thinking of what Luther once said in his appeal *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools*.

We quote a few excerpts:

Although the gospel came and still comes to us through the Holy Spirit alone, we cannot deny that it came through the medium of languages, was spread abroad by that means, and must be preserved by the same means ...

In proportion then as we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the languages. For it was not without purpose that God caused his Scriptures to be set down in these two languages alone - the Old Testament in Hebrew, and the New in Greek. Now if God did not despise them but chose them above all others for his word, then we too ought to honor them above all others ...

And let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit [Eph 6:17] is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored; and, as the gospel itself points out [Mt 14:20], they are the baskets in which are kept these loaves and fishes and fragments. If through our neglect we let the languages go (which God forbid!) we shall not only lose the gospel, but the time will come when we shall be unable either to speak or write a correct Latin or German ...

It is inevitable that unless the languages remain, the gospel must finally perish (LW 45, 358-360).

As was noted in the Old Testament department’s statement of objective cited above, in the exegesis of the Old Testament it is of utmost importance that students gain an understanding of God’s plan of salvation as this unfolds in the course of history. The Old Testament is *Heilsgeschichte*, salvation history. It centers in the promise of the Savior first given in Eden. This promise was transmitted to and through Seth, Noah, Shem,

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or Israel, and David, until at last “when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full righteousness of sons” (Ge 4:4f).

Although Israel was God’s chosen people from whom the promised Savior was to come, God never abandoned his purpose and plan that all people should be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4). In the promise given to Abram God underscored this truth when he told Abram, “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gn 12:3). In a later repetition of his promise God made special reference to Abraham’s Offspring or Seed, the promised Messiah: “Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed” (Gn 22:18). The blessing of salvation was not for Abraham and his descendants alone, but for all mankind. Only those who rejected this blessing through stubborn unbelief would lose out on this gracious gift of God and experience the terrible truth that “the way of the wicked will perish” (Ps 1:6).

The universality of God’s gospel promise is evident also in many of the Psalms. Psalm 96, for example, calls on all people to praise the LORD for his salvation: “Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples” (vv 1-3). Psalm 98 likewise says, “The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations ... All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (vv 2,3). Psalm 72 describes the glory of the Messiah’s universal kingdom and, alluding to the promise given to Abraham, declares, “All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed” (v 17). In Psalm 22, a prophecy of the Messiah’s suffering, death and subsequent exaltation, David looks ahead to the time of the New Testament and as the Messiah’s spokesman prophesies, “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD” (v 27).

Through his Old Testament prophets God continued to hold out the promise of salvation not only to his people Israel, but to the Gentiles as well. Through Isaiah, the evangelist of the Old Testament, the LORD promises his Son, his chosen suffering Servant, “I will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open the eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness” (42:6,7).

God intended that these promises should be made known to the heathen nations of the world. That was one of the reasons he placed Israel in Canaan, at the crossroads of the ancient Near East. Some of his prophets like Elijah, Elisha and Daniel lived and worked and testified in heathen lands. Jonah was sent to Nineveh, the capital of the mighty Assyrian empire, and through Jonah’s preaching the Ninevites came to repentance (Lk 11:32).

There is no need to demonstrate at length that in Jesus of Nazareth the Old Testament promises and prophecies of salvation were fulfilled. That is the thrust of the entire New Testament. We cite here only the familiar words of Simeon in which he describes the Child he held in his arms as “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Lk 2:32).

Old Testament exegesis that does not do justice to this grand theme that runs through the entire Old Testament like a golden thread misses the mark. Tragically, this must be said of much of contemporary Old Testament theology that is hailed as the acme of scholarship. Cohen, for example, a modern Jewish commentator on the Psalms, denies that Psalm 22, from which we quoted brief briefly above, is a prophecy of Christ and cites in support so-called Christian scholars. Cohen writes, “A Christological intention has long been read into this Psalm, but modern Christian exegetes are agreed that it describes a situation then existing and does not anticipate an event in the future. ‘It would not be sound or safe interpretation to rest much weight upon certain coincidences, touching and impressive as these are to the mind of the Christian believer’ (Davison, *Century Bible*)” (A. Cohen, *The Psalms* [London: Soncino, 1965], p 61).

This is but one example of the results of the so-called historical-critical method of interpretation. This method approaches the Bible with certain presuppositions. Time does not permit us to enter into a full discussion of these assumptions which constitute a veil, to use Paul’s term, over the eyes of these exegetes when they read the Old Testament. What Paul said about the unbelieving Jews applies also to unbelieving

“Christian” commentators: “Their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (2 Cor 3:14-16).

In essence, the presuppositions with which historical-critical interpreters operate are unabashed unbelief. These critics deny the divine inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures. They deny everything supernatural and miraculous. They deny that God has entered human history. They deny that the Old Testament prophets foretold the future. For them the Old Testament Scriptures are not the infallible Word of the infallible God but the fallible word of fallible men. As such, they insist the Old Testament is subject to the same standards of criticism that apply to other human documents. Is what it says capable of historical, logical and scientific proof? The answer of the negative higher critics is a resounding NO!

The historical-grammatical method of interpretation, on the other hand, also approaches the Old Testament with certain presuppositions and assumptions. Its bias is, admittedly, the bias of faith. Since every interpreter is either a believer or an unbeliever, there is no such thing as an unbiased interpretation.

We who interpret the Old Testament according to the historical-grammatical method read the Scriptures as the divinely inspired, infallible, inerrant, authoritative, holy and sacred Word of our gracious God. We approach them in the spirit of Samuel, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening” (1 Sm 3:9,10). We approach them mindful of God’s word through Isaiah, “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word” (66:2).

For us the Old Testament, like the New, is history. Hence, ours is the historical method. It should be noted that in the historical-critical method only that is recognized as historical which can be corroborated by historical records outside the Bible. We, however, hold that the historicity of the Bible is a given. For us in the Old Testament, as in the New, God speaks in human words, human language, human grammar and syntax. Hence, ours is also the grammatical method. We do not presume to be critics and sit in judgment over what is written. “This is what the LORD says.” “It is written.” That settles it! “The Scripture cannot be broken” (Jn 10:35).

For us the Old Testament testifies about Christ, as he himself said (Jn 5:39). We diligently study and search the Old Testament Scriptures that through them, as through the New, we might possess eternal life. We read them in the light of the New Testament with the conviction that “everything must be fulfilled that is written about [Christ] in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms” (Lk 24:44). We read them convinced that Jesus spoke the truth when, speaking about Moses, he said, “He wrote about me” (Jn 5:46). As we read Moses and the Prophets, our hearts burn within us just as the hearts of the Emmaus disciples did when Jesus opened to them the Scriptures (Lk 24:32). We read them with the prayer that through his Holy Spirit he might also open those Scriptures to us. We pray that “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets” he might also explain to us “what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Lk 24:27).

Since Scripture in its entirety, in all its parts and all its words, is the Word of God, it is from Genesis to Revelation a unified whole, without contradiction and without error. This is the basis for the hermeneutical principle that Scripture is its own interpreter. “*Scriptura...ipsa per sese...sui ipsius interpret,*” Luther wrote (Erl. Ed., 36, 160f). Since the Holy Spirit is the original author of the Scriptures, to him belongs the interpretation of it. Luther insists, “You should not give your own interpretation. The Holy Spirit Himself must expound Scripture” (LW 30, 166).

Of vital importance in the exegesis of the Old Testament is the distinction between the Abrahamic and the Sinaitic covenants. Confusion here leads to theological disaster. The covenant God made with Abraham was pure gospel. It was a covenant of grace. It was an everlasting covenant (Gn 17:17). In these respects it differed from the covenant God established with Israel at Sinai four centuries later. The Sinaitic covenant was conditional. “IF you obey me fully and keep my covenant...” God said to Israel (Ex 19:5). All its wonderful promises were contingent on Israel’s obedience. And the Sinaitic covenant was temporary. It was in effect only

“until the Seed (Christ) to whom the promise referred had come” (Ga 3:19). Failure to recognize this basic principle has vitiated much Old Testament exegesis ever since the Judaizers of the apostolic age.

The way to salvation was the same as for Adam and Eve as for you and me. It was through faith in the Seed of the woman who would crush the serpent’s head even as the serpent struck his heel. It was through faith in this promise that Abraham was saved, as Paul notes, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Ro 4:3; Gn 15:6). Referring to the Anointed One who was to come, David writes, “Blessed are all who take refuge [KJV: put their trust] in him” (Ps 2:12). The New Testament puts it this way, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Ac 16:31).

We cannot conclude this discussion of Old Testament exegesis at WLS without saying something about the interpretation of Old Testament Messianic prophecies. There is much confusion in this area, even among conservative Lutheran exegetes, not excluding some from the former Synodical Conference. It must be noted that there are three types of Messianic prophecy:

1. Direct or rectilinear prophecy;
2. Typical prophecy; and
3. Intermediately fulfilled or multiple reference prophecy.

Direct or rectilinear Messianic prophecies are those that point directly to Christ and find their fulfillment in him and in no one else. An example is the prophecy in Psalm 22:18 concerning the dividing of Christ’s clothes. This was fulfilled when the Roman soldiers divided Jesus’ clothes at the foot of the cross (Mt 27:35). The second kind of prophecy is one in which some Old Testament person, action, event or thing serves as a type that prefigures or foreshadows Christ or some other New Testament person, action, event or thing. What happened to David, for example, when he was betrayed by his friend Ahithophel is a typical prophecy of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, one of his own disciples (Ps 41:9; Jn 13:18).

Intermediately fulfilled or multiple reference prophecies have one or more proximate and partial fulfillments followed by a more remote and complete fulfillment. In 2 Samuel 7:13, for example, David is told that his seed will succeed him and sit on his throne. This was fulfilled in part when Solomon succeeded his father on Israel’s throne, as we are told in 1 Kings 5:5 and 8:20. It was also fulfilled in the Davidic kings who occupied the throne of the kingdom of Judah. The final and ultimate fulfillment came, however, when Gabriel announced Jesus’ birth to Mary and said, “The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” (Lk 1:32f).

Much more could and should perhaps be said about Old Testament exegesis at WLS. But we have probably already exhausted your patience and our share of time. In concluding, we wish to express one final thought, however, and that is this: The unity that we enjoy in the faculty of WLS in our approach to the interpretation of the Old Testament is a special, undeserved gift and blessing of God. “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” (Ps 133: 1). For this we who have the privilege of serving on this faculty and, in fact, our entire synod owe God our deepest gratitude and thanks.