

## In how far is exegesis eisegesis?

The question, “in how far is exegesis eisegesis?” is an interesting one, because it may stimulate an interpreter to think about how far he may interpret a text rationally. Let us look into the different meanings and functions of exegesis and eisegesis and the internal and external aspects of the exegetical process to see in how far they are apart, or move toward, or cross each other as well as determining on how much relevance this inquiry has.

Whenever we read a text,<sup>1</sup> we usually ask the questions: “What does it mean?” “Why does the text say this and not something else?”<sup>2</sup> “How can I rethink what is said so as to give it expression in my own words?”<sup>3</sup> These questions lead us to the engagement of exegesis,<sup>4</sup> which implies “reading out” of the meaning of the text what the original author or authors meant to convey.<sup>5</sup> Oppositely, eisegesis occurs when an exegete allows himself to “read into” the text in light of the tradition without any critical judgment or without letting the text speak afresh and on its own.<sup>6</sup> Namely, when the interpreter reads into what he wishes to find or thinks he finds there, and it expresses his own subjective ideas (not the meaning which is in the text), then eisegesis, or faulty exegesis, arises.<sup>7</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> A text may “show” us something about the nature of meaning and signification which it is not able to formulate as a proposition (Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an introduction* (Minneapolis: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2006), 116).

<sup>2</sup> John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner’s Handbook* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1973), 104.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. It is what exegesis is about: what are the possibilities and what mostly did the author intend by this usage? (Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament exegesis: a handbook for students and pastor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 76).

<sup>5</sup> Jay G. Williams, “Exegesis-Eisegesis: Is There A Difference?” *Theology Today*, 30 no. 3 (1973): 218. <http://web.ebscohost.com> (accessed March 11, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Hayes, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, 218. Eisegesis may also occur when the wrong kinds of questions are asked of a text or when the appropriate kinds of questions are answered wrongly (Hayes, 24). Negatively, in extreme cases, eisegesis arises when an interpreter sets his intentional agenda before reading the text; he puts irrelevant

understanding the meanings of exegesis and eisegesis, we recognize that it is nearly impossible to have a pure “read out” or “found” exegesis in which the interpreter retains the “pure” interpretation of the text and its ultimate integrity, because exegesis by itself carries some apparent fallacies in evidence, superior knowledge, word study, reading between the lines, and others.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, within eisegesis, there is more or less a “reading into” or “fabrication” of the text, depending on various factors. Generally, the meaning of a text is not apparent in terms of “found” (exegesis) or being “fabricated” (eisegesis); rather, the more complicated question becomes what is revealed to and about the interpreter in the interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

Having addressed this issue, let us discuss the question: “In how far is exegesis eisegesis?” Namely, in how far is our “reading out” or “found” interpretation (exegesis) a “reading into” or “fabricated” interpretation (eisegesis) of the text?

To examine this question, let us focus only on the spatial or physical aspect of the word “how far” (in terms of imaginative distance) and put aside metaphysical or theoretical notions of “how far” (in term of abstract meaning), because of limited space. Also, let us concentrate on the written communication in which interaction takes place primarily between the text and the interpreter (or reader).<sup>10</sup> Let us imagine a physical

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questions for a certain matters or irrelevant answers for the addressed issues; he neither allow the questions and issues arise from the text itself nor utilize the appropriate tools to a given exegetical techniques. In a mild cases, he may use secondary consultation and orientation of the text; he may use overwhelm information of historical, lexicographical, and linguistic without assembling them into an overall scheme or coherent interpretation; and he may involve in a verse-by-verse fashion or in a series of word studies (Hayes, 105-111).

<sup>8</sup> William D. Barrick, “Exegetical Fallacies: Common interpretive mistakes every student must avoid.” *Master’s Seminary Journal*, 19 no 1 (2008): 15. <http://search.ebscohost.com> (accessed May 10, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Williams, 227.

<sup>10</sup> A text may “show” us something about the nature of meaning and signification which it is not able to formulate as a proposition (Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an introduction* (Minneapolis: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2006), 116). We are at all times engaged in constructing hypotheses about the meaning of the text. The interpreter makes implicit connections, fills the gaps, draws inferences and test out hunches; and to do this means drawing on a tacit knowledge of the world in general and of literary convention in

linear spectrum of a “found” or “read out” (exegesis) that is movable on one side and a “fabricated” or “read into” (eisegesis) that is movable on other side. They may move toward, or further away from, or overlap each other depending on various factors. When they move toward each other, their gaps in difference become smaller. Conversely, when they move farther away from one another, their gaps in difference become wider. When they cross or overlap each other, the distinction between the two is difficult to determine.

Now, let us examine the exegetical process of the external and internal aspects of the written text to see in how far exegesis is eisegesis.<sup>11</sup>

In the exegetic process of an external aspect of the written text, various factors determine “how far is exegesis eisegesis.” First, how far the gap is between the “found” (exegesis) and “fabricated” (eisegesis) depends on the degree of language difference between the written text and the interpreter. If the interpreter is involved in a second-level interpretation (an interpretation of a translation), the gap between exegesis and eisegesis would be smaller than that of a first-level interpretation (the interpretation made of the original).<sup>12</sup> Namely, if an interpreter interprets a translation text, he has more chance to “read into” or “fabricate” (eisegesis) intentionally or unintentionally than to “read out” or

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particular. The text itself is really no more than a series of “cues” to the interpreter, invitations to construct a piece of language into meaning (Eagleton, 66). Most of us recognize that no reading is innocent or without presupposition (Eagleton, 77). The meaning of the text is not just an internal matter: it also inheres in the text’s relation to wider systems of meaning, to other texts, codes, and norms in literature and society as a whole. Its meaning is also relative to the interpreter’s “horizon of expectation” (Eagleton, 89). The writer becomes less important, because he or she is generally not present when the interpreter reads a text or document (Hayes, 6).

<sup>11</sup> Since there is limited space, I omit discussions of the exegetical process of oral communication, which involves speaker, word, content, and interpreter (Hayes, 6).

<sup>12</sup> A first-level interpretation is the interpretation made of the original, whereby a native speaker or hearer or by one who has acquired knowledge of the original language. The second-level interpretation occurs when an interpreter seeks to understand the content of the translation (Hayes, 9). Since each language has its own distinctive structure, grammatical features, and vocabulary nuances, it is very difficult for an outsider to acquire the proficiency of the native (Hayes, 9).

“found” (exegesis) of an original text. As a result, the exegetical process moves away from the “found” (exegesis) side and toward the “fabricated” (eisegesis) side.<sup>13</sup>

Second, cultural differences also create a gap potential. The more remote and different the culture presupposed and reflected in the text from that of the interpreter, the smaller the gap is between the “found” (exegesis) and “fabricated” (eisegesis).<sup>14</sup> Namely, if the interpreter interprets a text of a cultural different from his, he has a greater chance of committing a fabrication (eisegesis) than when he interprets a text that was written within his cultural knowledge.

Third, in a “historical gap,” the greater the gap is between the past and the present, the smaller the gap is between the “found” (exegesis) and “fabricated” (eisegesis): the greater the gap between the past and the present, the greater the differences in people and places, practices and perspectives, customs and conventions, and so on.<sup>15</sup>

Fourth, the more collective and historical growth of the documents, the wider the gap is between the “found” (exegesis) and “fabricated” (eisegesis).<sup>16</sup> For example, the encyclopedia is a collection of various authors and articles, and it grows with time. If a researcher likes to do research about certain subject, he would need to search for various

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<sup>13</sup> For example, if a Chinese interpreter tries to understand a translated English novel, he has more chance to “read into” or “fabricate” (eisegesis) that text than when he reads a Chinese novel.

<sup>14</sup> A document may explicitly mention, describe, or allude to special ideas, practices, and customs which would be clearly understood by a person reading the document in the original culture, not a reader in a different culture. Also, the general reservoir of experience, worldview, and perception which lies behind the text would not be shared by the cultural outsider (Hayes, 10). For example, in some cultures, there are many different hierarchal levels of addressing people in society, according to their knowledge, social status, and others.

<sup>15</sup> A person in the present studying a document from the past is separated chronologically from the time when the document was produced. Also, when he interprets documents from the more distant past, he often encounters matters that are a “world apart” from the present, i.e. person and places, practices and perspectives, customs and conventions, and so on (Hayes, 10-11). For example, the interpreter’s understanding of a today’s newspaper is quite different from his understanding of a fifty years old’s newspaper because of the differences in the concerned issues of the day, the stylistic written articles, prices for advertised items, and others.

<sup>16</sup> This process of growth and historical development can occasionally be seen in “seams” in the material, anachronisms, in the text, differences in style, and even contradictions in the contents (Hayes, 12).

texts (with different authors) within the related subject and consider the published periods of those texts. If he selects texts written by some competent authors of a more recent period, he would have more chance to “read out” or interpret the text with a greater degree of the text’s integrity (exegesis) than that drawn from an incompetent authors in the early period. Namely, his exegetical process would move toward the exegetic side and away from the eisegetic side, widening the gap between exegesis and eisegesis.

Fifth, the existence of multiple and different texts of the same documents creates a gap between exegesis and eisegesis.<sup>17</sup> If there are diverging copies of the same work in several languages, the interpreter has more chance to “fabricate” (eisegesis) the text than when he works on different copies of the same work in the same language. Hence, the exegetical process moves away from the exegetical side and toward the eisegetical side, shortening the gap between exegesis and eisegesis.

Thus, the above factors of the external aspects of the exegetical process help to show in how far “found” (exegesis) is “fabricated” (eisegesis).

In addition, the exegetical process of the internal aspect of the written text involves various criticisms.<sup>18</sup> First, the task of textual criticism is: to determine the process by which a text has been transmitted and has come to exist in variant form; to establish the original wording, when this is seen to be a possible or feasible aim; and to determine the best form and wording of the text which the modern reader should use.<sup>19</sup> So, the exegetical process as it moves more or less toward either exegesis or eisegesis

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<sup>17</sup> Usually, two or more copies of a given document exist but with lesser or greater differences between the copies (Hayes, 13).

<sup>18</sup> “Criticism” derives from the Greek word *krinein*, meaning “to judge” or “to discern,” and denotes the process through which discerning judgments are made. However, “criticism” per se is a neutral term (Hayes, 25).

<sup>19</sup> Hayes, 35.

depends on how well the interpreter can perform and fulfill the requirements of these criteria. If he can perform and fulfill the requirements, his exegetical process would move toward the exegetical side; as a result, the gap between exegesis and eisegesis would be wider. Otherwise, his exegetical process would move toward the eisegetical side; as a result, the gap between exegesis and eisegesis is smaller.

Second, in historical criticism, the exegetical process moves more or less toward either exegesis or eisegesis depending on how much the interpreter can overcome the historical and cultural gaps and have knowledge of the historical and cultural dimensions described in the texts as well as the historical, cultural, and biographical context of the produced texts.<sup>20</sup> If the interpreter can overcome these gaps and obtain adequate knowledge of the internal and external aspects of the text, his exegetical process would move toward the exegetical side. As a result, the gap between exegesis and eisegesis would be wider. Otherwise, his exegetical process would move toward the eisegetical side. As a result, the gap between exegesis and eisegesis is smaller.

Third, in grammatical criticism, the interpreter's interpretation moves more or less toward either exegesis or eisegesis depending on how the interpreter deals with words arranged in various combinations, syntax, grammatical structures, and others.<sup>21</sup> In this

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<sup>20</sup> Historical criticism seeks to overcome the historical and cultural gaps in interpreting ancient documents. Historical criticism is concerned with two sets of situations: the situation described in the text itself and the situation which gave rise to the document. Hence, historical criticism proceeds on the basis of two related internal and external aspects of a document. Internally, the historical aspects of a document are related to the historical and cultural dimensions described in the texts. Externally, historical aspects of a document are related to the historical, cultural, and biographical context in which the document was produced (Hayes, 42).

<sup>21</sup> Grammatical criticism is a set of skills and disciplines through which the interpreter seeks to re-create and enter the original thought world and linguistic frame of reference of the text. The interpreter deals not only the conveyed ideas and concepts through the words, but also through words arranged in various combinations (Hayes, 54). All attempts to answer questions pertaining to the language of the text (including both the words themselves) and the way in which words are put together or the syntax and grammar of the sentence or paragraph concern with the grammatical criticism (Hayes, 25). Specifically, within the grammatical criticism, there are potential fallacious conclusions which can be drawn from the studies of

case, if he can deal with them adequately and properly, his interpretation moves toward the exegetical side, widening the distance between exegesis and eisegesis. Otherwise, his interpretation would move toward the esegetical side. Thus, the gap between exegesis and eisegesis shrinks.

In short, the above factors of internal aspects of exegetical process also show in how far “found” (exegesis) is “fabricated” (eisegesis).

Generally, within this physical or spatial spectrum of exegesis and eisegesis, the degree to which an interpreter’s interpretation errs to the side of exegesis or toward eisegesis is due in large part to the degree of the interpreter’s knowledge and awareness of the internal and external aspects of the exegetical process. If the interpreter has insufficient knowledge and awareness of the internal and external aspects of exegetical process, his interpretation moves further toward a greater degree of “fabricated” eisegesis, shrinking the gap between exegesis and eisegesis. Conversely, if he has sufficient knowledge of the related factors within or around the text, his interpretation would have a better chance of moving further toward the “found” exegetical side. As a result, the gap between exegesis and eisegesis is wider. Furthermore, if the interpreter commits exegetical fallacies, the exegesis and eisegesis have more chances to overlap each other.<sup>22</sup> In these exegetical fallacies, we see that the interpreter is purposely “reading into” the text, which may cause exegesis and eisegesis to cross one another. Namely, the gap

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performing word and using wordbooks, lexicons, and dictionaries: “root fallacy” (the basic meaning is often assumed to be “carried” in root form of word); “original meaning” (the ancient users’ usages were quite different from that of modern writers); and others (Hayes, 54, 59).

<sup>22</sup> For instance, “Evidential Fallacy” fails to approach the text with the presumption that it is accurate. “Superior Knowledge Fallacy” occurs when one, in approaching difficult texts, practices textual emendation to accommodate the critic’s ignorance. “Word Study Fallacy” uses imaginative extrapolations to find unjustified meanings in individual words. “Fallacy of Reading Between the Lines” reads into the text what one thinks the text implies. Sometimes a translation leaves out words found in the original language causing the “Fallacy of Reduction” (Barrick, 15).

between exegesis and eisegesis may become trivial. That is in how far exegesis is eisegesis.

By examining the exegetical process of the external and internal aspects of the written text, we recognize that the question is not merely about exegesis or eisegesis. Rather, the question is also what is revealed in the text, which is based on culture, history, language, grammar, and others. Also, we can see that in the interpretation, it is the interpreter who determines the exegesis or eisegesis of the text. Namely, the meaning of a text is not apparent in terms of being “fabricated (eisegesis)” or “found (exegesis)” but becomes a more complicated question whether the creative and inventive guesses of the interpreter have been on target.<sup>23</sup> The interpreter mostly engages in constructing hypotheses about the meaning of the text.<sup>24</sup> He makes implicit connections, fills in gaps, draws inferences and tests out intuitions; namely, drawing on unstated knowledge of the world and of literary conventions.<sup>25</sup> The text itself is merely a series of “cues,” for him to construct a piece of language into meaning.<sup>26</sup> For instance, in reading the Bible, no one can talk about the meaning of the Bible without describing what it means to him. When he does that, he tells the reader as much about himself as he does about the Scriptures.<sup>27</sup> If he tries to escape that dilemma (if it is such) through objectivity, what he does is to present himself as a detached and alienated human being.<sup>28</sup> For example, within almost every page of the Old Testament, Augustine saw references to the Trinity, predictions

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<sup>23</sup> William J. Zanardi: “Fabricating Facts: How Exegesis Presupposes Eisegesis” *Journal of Macrodynamic Analysis* 3 (2003): 263. <http://www.mun.ca/jmda/vol3/zanardi.pdf> (accessed March 11, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Eagleton, 66

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>27</sup> Williams, 226.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.,

and types of Christ, and metaphorical teachings of various moral and spiritual values.<sup>29</sup> To us, his works seem extraordinarily eisegetical, but within his cultural and spiritual context it all seemed quite simple and obvious. He just read into the Scripture what he wanted to find.<sup>30</sup> Namely, his interpretation moves to the eisegetic side. As a result, the gap between exegesis and eisegesis is smaller. Exegesis and eisegesis may overlap each other, too. Even the great interpreters, like Origen and Rashi, appear to have “read into” Christian scripture almost as much as they read out.<sup>31</sup> Also, even ordinarily careful scholars make mistakes (of “reading into” eisegesis instead of “reading out” exegesis of the text), perhaps because they have relied on unreliable secondary sources, or because their own memories have played tricks on them.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Williams, 222. The Old Testament, a name coined by Melito of Sardis in the 2nd century AD, is longer than the Hebrew Bible, in part because Christian editors divided particular works into two sections but also because different Christian groups consider as canonical some texts not found in the Hebrew Bible (“Old Testament.” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-9475700> (accessed May 4, 2010)). Augustine was born on November 13 of 354 A.D in Tagaste, Numidia [now Souk Ahras, Algeria] and died on August 28 of 430 A.D in Hippo Regius [now Annaba, Algeria]. He was called as *Saint Augustine of Hippo*, original Latin name *Aurelius Augustinus*. He was bishop of Hippo from 396 to 430, one of the Latin Fathers of the Church, one of the Doctors of the Church, and perhaps the most significant Christian thinker after St. Paul. Augustine's adaptation of classical thought to Christian teaching created a theological system of great power and lasting influence. His numerous written works, the most important of which are *Confessions* and *City of God*, shaped the practice of biblical exegesis and helped lay the foundation for much of medieval and modern Christian thought (“Augustine, Saint.” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-9109388>. (accessed on May 03, 2010)). In Christian doctrine, Trinity is the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three persons in one Godhead (“Trinity.” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-9073399> (accessed on May 4, 2010)).

<sup>30</sup> Williams, 222.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Origen was born in 185 A.D, probably Alexandria, Egypt; he died in 254 A.D, Tyre, Phoenicia [now Sur, Lebanon]. His Latin name was *Oregenes Adamantius*. He was the most important theologian and biblical scholar of the early Greek church. His greatest work is the *Hexapla*, which is a synopsis of six versions of the Old Testament (“Origen.” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-9057374>. (accessed on May 3, 2010)). Rashi was born in 1040, Troyes, Champagne; he died in July 13, 1105, Troyes. He is a renowned medieval French commentator on the Bible and Talmud (the authoritative Jewish compendium of law, lore, and commentary). Rashi combined the two basic methods of interpretation, literal and non-literal, in his influential Bible commentary (“Rashi.” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-9062727> (accessed May 3, 2010)).

<sup>32</sup> D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Barker Book House, 1985), 118.

In addition, while interpreting the text, the interpreter may begin to understand himself, understand himself better, and understand himself differently.<sup>33</sup> Besides, the exegetical process may reveal the interpreter's distinct characteristics, which shape his interpretative process of the text (in moving toward either exegesis or eisegesis) tremendously.<sup>34</sup> First, the interpreter comes to a reading of the text as a social subject with a certain pre-understanding (which is never merely personal and simply static) of the subject matter of the text: certain personal questions, opinion, responses, expectations, fears, and hopes.<sup>35</sup> Second, as a consciously historical self, the interpreter wants to render explicit the history of the text's effects, influences and interpretations as well as the history, partly traditional and partly personal, of the interpreter's own pre-understanding of the tradition.<sup>36</sup> Third, the interpreter may concentrate on the subject matter of the text: the questions, responses, hints, resonances, and feelings—the "world" disclosed in front of the text through the text's form.<sup>37</sup> Fourth, the interpreter may interpret the text in a larger conversation of the entire community of inquiry.<sup>38</sup> Hence, it confirms that the question is not about exegesis or eisegesis but rather what is revealed to and about the interpreter in the interpretation.<sup>39</sup>

In summary, within the physical or spatial spectrum of exegesis and eisegesis, the degree to which an interpreter's interpretation errs to the side of exegesis or toward eisegesis is due in large part to the degree of the interpreter's knowledge and awareness

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<sup>33</sup> Shaun Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and education* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 158.

<sup>34</sup> David Tracy, *The analogical imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 118-120.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>39</sup> Williams, 227.

of the internal and external aspects of the exegetical process of the text. Also, if the interpreter commits exegetical fallacies, the exegesis and eisegesis have a greater chance of overlapping. Also, we can see in the interpretation that it is the interpreter who determines the exegesis or eisegesis of the text. Hence, the question, “in how far is exegesis eisegesis?” may be relevant only if we recognize that ultimately it is the interpreter (with several interpretive and distinct characteristics) who determines in how far exegesis is eisegesis.

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