Ex-Jesus or Exegesis? How to Break the Students' Resistance to Learn Biblical Exegesis[1]

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The teaching of biblical exegesis normally attracts students with two distinct goals (a) to learn biblical exegesis as an abstract technique that prepares them for advanced academic degrees, or (b) to achieve the necessary skills for interpreting biblical texts in ways that transform lives. For the latter to happen, the instructor must motivate and even mentally jolt students to reconsider the embedded biblical interpretation that they bring with them to seminary, one that is typically based on faith. Thus, the teaching of biblical exegesis to those preparing for church ministry should provoke students to reexamine texts that they took for granted based on church tradition. This article demonstrates one of the methods that the author uses to teach biblical exegesis that excites the two types of students.

Introduction: Teaching Biblical Exegesis

The mind-changing introduction to biblical exegesis for church-bound and theologically conservative seminarians is achieved by relating several introductory biblical exegesis lessons directly to the biblical texts that the students have learned from the church. In most cases students continue to use these texts when leading Bible study and preaching sermons even as they matriculate at theological institutions. Teaching the method in the abstract, assuming that students would eventually realize the value of the method and utilize it in Bible study or sermon preparation after graduation is a big mistake.[3] The majority of graduates

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[1] The title is based on students who come to seminary determined to resist critical thinking about theological issues of faith and the Bible. Some students have labeled seminary as a theological cemetery which teaches ex-Jesus. How these students' thinking has been turned around in one semester is the subject of this article.

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[3] See Mafico, "Biblical Exegesis and Its Shortcoming in Theological Education," in *Teaching the Bible,* edited by F.F. Segovia and M.A. Tolbert, New York: Orbis Books, 255-271.

will continue to preach as they did before they acquired a seminary education.[4] Abstract teaching of the exegetical method to church-bound students typically yields two adverse results. Some students study hard to pass biblical exegesis solely as a requirement for graduation. Others, on the other hand, only end up learning the exegetical terminologies like pericope, hermeneutics, *hapax legomenon*, haplography, and so on with which they will use to impress their congregations. For these students, the instructor failed to teach them; and they, on their part, failed to learn how to interpret the Bible in a way that makes biblical texts come alive in their preaching and their Bible study lessons.

Updating Sunday School Bible Knowledge

The effective approach that I use to introduce biblical exegesis to theologically conservative students is to begin the course with a provocative statement. The one I normally use is "God is not good all the time."[5] This always shocks students and immediately causes them to stop texting or surfing the Web. They quickly position themselves to defend their embedded theology about God whom they have always affirmed as "good all the time," a mantra they ask their congregations to repeat every Sunday. Instead of defending God based only on their faith and/or church tradition, I invite students to journey with me through the Bible to read about, hear about, and ultimately meet the God of the Israelites whom the Christians adopted as their own. This approach teaches the students to look at the Bible holistically and not only memorize or study selective verses or texts out of context.[6] The students end up realizing the

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[4] This assertion is based on my several visits to some of the churches where seminary graduates serve as pastors.

[5] In addition to "God is not good all the time," I also add "God boasts of being evil...." These are some of the texts that support the assertion: Exod 4:11, where God boasts, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" Other similar verses are I Kgs 22:20, 23; Isa 45:7; John 11:1-3. We also look at the innocent or righteous Job whom God tortured for absolutely no reason. At the end of this introductory exercise, students become ready to closely study the Bible exegetically.

[6] Before selecting their pericopes, I urge students to read the entire book we are studying for at least three times. The first time, they are to read it fast to get general information of what the book is about. During the second reading, students must begin to note important episodes, plots, oracles, judgments and punishments, etc. By the third reading, students will have learned knowledge of

difference between the God they knew by faith and the God of the Bible whom they have finally met by critically reading the biblical text.[7]

The next step in the orientation of students to biblical exegesis is to look at other familiar texts that the church uses often and that they have come to embrace. For example, I assign students to study Malachi 3:10 in its context. The verse reads:

> Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.

This is a verse that the church uses to persuade the congregation to tithe in order to receive blessings from God. Careful reading of this verse within its context typically convinces students that the church has consistently used the verse out of its context and therefore potentially in appropriately. Once the students realize the disconnection between the biblical interpretation they had taken for granted and the actual message of the Bible, they become more attentive and receptive to the benefits of

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the biblical book and critical questions the book raises.

[7] My former student, Byron Wade (graduate of 1996) writes: *"Sunday School" religion vs. critical thinking* - I think most people come to seminary with a fairly fundamentalist and conservative theological understanding of biblical texts - and that was challenged pretty quickly. I was one who pretty much believed that every word, phrase, sentence and paragraph was true and inerrant. Like the old people used to say, "God said it, I believe it and that's it!" Imagine my shock in the first semester of Old Testament class with Dr. Temba Mafico when he taught the class that the Jonah and Fish story (which I LOVED) was not only untrue; but it might be an allegory. My mind was blown - but not enough to leave seminary .... I learned from there the skills of exegesis and critical thinking about a text. I learned how to consider the original language, culture, history ... to discern and listen to what God is saying so I could tell the people the meaning of the text. This is a valuable skill that I believe more people need to learn. To this day I am still driven crazy by people who say, "This is what the Bible says" just on face value. I say, "READ AND LEARN ABOUT THE TEXT!" posted July 14, 2014:
http://thewordfromb.typepad.com/blog/2014/07/what-i-learned-in-seminary-and-keeps-me-going-until-today-.html,

studying the Bible exegetically. Unless students see the benefits of the exegetical method for their academic or spiritual growth and for the church, they are not going to buy into what the biblical exegesis course offers even though their course grades may be stellar.

Because the Bible was not written for the "gentiles,"[8] it should be self-evident that the "gentiles" must first seek to understand what the Israelites meant by their own scriptures before we can adapt the text-message to our own circumstances.[9] But in doing so, we still face many problems because there are certain Hebrew concepts that are impossible to explain in the English or other languages. For instance, under what circumstances did the Israelites expect *mishpat* from God? Does *mishpat* mean the same as "justice" in English? An answer to these questions would help us understand the meaning of the Hebrew phrase *ya'aseh mishpat* in Genesis 18:25, translated in English as "to do justice" and so on. To arrive at the best meaning of the term *mishpat*, the students must employ the historical critical method in order to study the passage critically. To do so, I have found the following basic steps comprehensive enough to introduce biblical exegesis gradually.[10] These steps help students realize that interpreting biblical passages is a complicated task because the Bible is replete with many diverse

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[8] The uncritical students have always assumed that the Jews wrote the Bible for all humankind as God dictated the word. A brief exposure to the Acts of the Apostles makes them realize that if they had lived in New Testament times, they too would have been called gentiles.

[9] I arrived at Harvard as a biblicist (one who believes in the inerrancy of the Bible). In 1977 I lived in Israel for several months. One day I was debating with a rabbi about a certain biblical text. He replied, "The problem with Christians is that they borrowed our book; and now they try to teach us what our book means to us." That opened my eyes to realize that I could only understand the Bible by first paying close attention to the *Sitz im Leben,* i.e., the setting in the real life of Israelites at the time when the text was spoken or written. Only when I do that would I be in a better position to adopt the Hebrew text and then adapt it for my contemporarily audiences.

[10] The students are also told that there are endless methods of studying the Bible: some have stood the test of time (historical criticism, form criticism, canonical criticism, literary criticism, textual criticism, etc.) and others are emerging every time (ideological criticism, political criticism, sociological and cultural criticism, among others) and many other modern methods of interpreting the Bible based on geographical location and political episodes.

problems.[11] These steps also expose the students to the various modern ways of reading the Bible.[12] Moreover, this intensive introduction to biblical exegesis convinces the students that they must fully study the Bible critically in order to teach and preach convincingly. To deepen their learning of the exegetical methods, I advise them to form small study groups. In small groups students learn more because they encourage each other by sharing what they learned.

The Reason for Choosing a Pericope

To begin the exegetical process, the student must explain in her paper why she has chosen to exegete the particular text/pericope. The reasons the student gives will help inform the instructor whether or not the student has embraced the exegetical method and appreciates its benefits for interpreting the Bible in an effective and transformative way, or whether the student still needs more help to understand the process and benefits of studying the Bible exegetically. The student must be made aware that no text is an independent entity; it is part of a longer narrative. Therefore, a pericope has to be understood within its larger narrative or poetic context. For instance, in studying Gen 18:17-25, the student would need to read the entire chapters of Gen 18 and 19 at least three times in order to understand what Abraham meant by the "justice of God." My advice to students is: "Read the text until you hear the Bible talking back to you."

Illustrating the Process

Our demonstrative pericope is Gen 18:17-25. This is how it reads:

[17] The Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, [18] seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all fbe nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? [19]

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[11] The Old Testament has many duplicates e.g., two stories of creation apparently written by different authors; duplicate texts relating to the creation of humans; two stories of the flood: one by P and the other by J, and many more. There is also dittography in the Hebrew Bible, e.g., Isa 31:6 compare with IQIsaᵃ; see also Lev 20:10, and many others.
[12] See note 10 above.

No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice[13]; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." 20 Then the Lord said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! [21] I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know." 22 So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. 23 Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? 25 *Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?*

Reasons for Choosing this Pericope

The student will state why she chosen to exegete the pericope. She will say, "I have chosen to exegete this pericope, first, because I am interested in justice issues. The second reason is to try to establish the meaning of the term *mishpat*, which is used in many different ways and is diversely translated in Bible versions by meanings that range "justice," "judgment," "rights," to "reward," and so on. It appears to me that justice is the key word in this text and it makes its first appearance here in the Hebrew Bible."

Context of the Pericope

The student is required to provide the context of the text that she has chosen to exegete. Students are typically amazed to realize that reading a familiar verse or text within its context changes the erroneous or naïve meaning that they had given to it based on the church's hackneyed interpretation that often ignores the context. On their own,

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[13] Italics are added to identify verses that will be closely analyzed below because they contain the term "*mishpat.*"

students have managed to distinguish between eisegesis and exegesis of the biblical text.

Regarding our text, the discussion between God, who is named Yahweh in Gen 18, seems to be redactional. This raises several questions. For instance, What was the redactor's reason for placing this text here? This and other questions should compel the student to take a closer look at this text. Yahweh approached Abraham's tent, but as Abraham looked, he saw three men standing near him (Gen 18:2). And yet he ran to meet them; but only addressed one of them as אֲדֹנָי (*adoni*), "my lord." Following the salutation and hospitality that Abraham and Sarah provided them, two of the three divinities descended toward Sodom (v. 22). But Yahweh remained behind and told Abraham following a soliloquy that he was going to verify the זַעֲקַת סְדֹם, (*za'aqat Sedom*[14]) that had reached heaven.

Excursus on the Controversial purpose for the Divine Visit

Yahweh is the deity who called Abraham to leave his native land to wander into Canaan, the land that he was giving him and his descendants as an inheritance. Perhaps because of what happened after a similar visit to Babel in Gen 11, Yahweh is certain that the verification of the *za'aqah* would indict Sodom for various antisocial crimes, which ranged from disregard for strangers (Gen 19:4-5).[15] to inordinate sexual drive that included threats of rape to the strangers (Gen 19:6-9). Thus Yahweh shared with Abraham his ominous mission to Sodom.[16] His disclosure of this mission prompted Abraham to confront him with the dilemma of how Yahweh would practice *mishpat* on Sodom by burning it, paying no regard for the righteous people living in it. We assert that Abraham was quite aware that Sodom was sinful and must be punished. Nonetheless, he also thought that there could be a few righteous people among them. What baffled Abraham was how Yahweh would dispense *mishpat* on a city cherished by both the wicked and the righteous people dwelling in it. Abraham had no problem with Yahweh's punishment of

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[14] The term *za'aqah/tsa'aqah* sounds a distress signal that people or the land makes to summon God to executive decisive justice on the offenders. For similar usages, cf. Gen 4:11 where the blood of Abel was crying (*tso'aqim*) to Yahweh and Yahweh punished Cain for fratricide. See also Exodus 3:7 where Yahweh referring to Israelites' cry said to Moses "I have heard their cry (וְאֶת־צַעֲקָתָם)" (Exod 3:7 BHS).

the wicked by burning the city. But he had a concern that by punishing the wicked in that way, the few righteous would not receive their just deserts (*mishpat*) expected from Yahweh, the God of *mishpat*. Yahweh's response is consistent with his attribute of practicing *mishpat*. He reassured Abraham that if he found even as few as five people living in the city of Sodom, he would spare it.

So why did Yahweh destroy the city after all, not sparing it for as few as five righteous people, namely Lot and his family? The answer is simple. The city was completely (*kalah*) evil and deserved utter destruction. Lot and his children were not dwellers (*moshabim*) of the city. They were the *gerim*,[17] "aliens," "strangers" or "sojourners." Therefore, by evacuating them from the city, Sodom no longer had a righteous person living in it. Thus, consistent with his principle of *mishpat*, "rewarding people according to their just deserts," Yahweh committed Sodom to destruction by a fiery furnace. This text demonstrates that Yahweh regards *mishpat* as being superior to anything else humans can do for God. It is so important to him that even five people practicing *mishpat* could save a city inhabited by a great majority of wicked people. There are several biblical texts that corroborate the importance of *mishpat*. This is made clear in Mic 6:6, Amos 5:21-24.

The Exegetical Process

Exegeting a text must include assessing the integrity of the text that is being exegeted. Several questions need to be asked and answered during the exegetical process. Among the question are these: Is the text devoid of corruptions or errors such as dittography, haplography, glossing, and so on?[18] What was the original purpose for the text? Who wrote or spoke it? Texts come alive if understood within their original context (*Sitz im Leben*).[19]

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[15] See Lev 19:34-35 passim regarding taking care of aliens.

[16] When Yahweh makes serious decisions, he either addresses the divine council of speaks in soliloquies. See also Gen 6:3 cf. 11:6-7).

[17] The city dwellers clearly refer to Lot as a ger, sojourner: "This fellow came here as an **alien**, and he would play the judge..." (Gen 19:9).

[18] For a thorough discussion of the textual errors, read P. Kyle McCarter, *Textual Criticism: Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986, pp. 26-61.

[19] This is a German phrase that was first used by Herman Gunkell in 1906 to

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Historical Critical Method

Textual criticism goes hand in hand with historical criticism and form criticism. To get closer to the audience of the original author, one must subject the text to a historical critical analysis. That calls for the scrutiny of the usage and meanings of words and phrases while at the same time attempting to date the text. Scholars who argue that the historical critical method is archaic and should be discarded are, in most cases, either not well trained in the original Semitic languages or did not become acquainted with the value of linguistics, Semitic epigraphy, biblical archaeology, and other related disciplines that take the reader to the rudimentary origin of the Bible. It is important that the modern readers strive to unravel the original social, religious, political or international context of the text that they are reading/studying. What the text says to today's reader may not reflect what the original author intended or meant to convey to his audience. Moreover, there is a distinction between the history in the text, i.e., the history that the modern reader gets out of reading the text, and the history of the text, i.e., the history of its transmission from the original author to the modern reader. To address these issues, a serious Bible student must do text criticism of the pericope. There are many scholarly journals and commentaries that should be consulted profitably for information on the authenticity and history of the text being studied. Biblical scholars have already done much of the research; the current student must weigh the evidence of their research and reflect it in her exegetical paper.

Textual Criticism in Brief

Texts have a history of transmission. The original writers may have made errors while writing, and subsequent copyists may also have compounded the problem of textual corruption by adding their own. In order to do textual criticism, I encourage students to take these two languages: Biblical Hebrew and Classical Greek. Doing textual criticism even without mastery of these languages motivates students to desire to study basic biblical languages in the future. My teaching experience confirms that following my exegesis course, several students have

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refer to "soeiological setting within the life of Israel … in which particular rhetorical forms (legends, sayings, liturgical formulae, psalms, prophecies, parables, etc.) first took shape." (Soulen, 151).

subsequently taken these languages although their denominations did not require them for graduation and ordination.

A basic familiarity with biblical languages enables students to read the Hebrew and Greek Bibles and critical notes in Bible commentaries and religious journals. Moreover, such familiarity makes them able to understand and benefit from the critical and explanatory notes at the bottom of scholarly Bible translations. It also exposes students to how words have evolved in meaning diachronically from their original usage in ancient times to their meanings in modern Bible versions.

Even without knowledge of biblical languages, there are ways students can detect that something is wrong with the text. This they can do by comparing various major Bible translations and noting the key differences in their translations. Of course, it is not possible to fully translate the Hebrew Bible or Greek New Testament into another language. Therefore, Bible translations are different due to the fact that the texts they are translating include textual corruptions and obscure words or idioms that have no parallel in other languages. Let us look at how Bible translations illuminate what we are talking about using our Genesis 18 text as an example.[20]

A Closer Look at Gen 18:17-25

There are no textual errors in the chosen pericope except minor suggestions made by the *BHS*.[21] However, the source of our pericope (Gen 1-33) seems to be composite although scholars ascribe it to the Yahwistic source (J).[22] Gen 18:1 reports that Yahweh appeared to

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[20] A student must choose a particular scholar whose exegetical method he likes. Learn as much from that scholar as possible by reading that scholar's articles, books and commentary entries in order to capture his/her intellectual mind. I learned a great deal while studying at Harvard by reading repeatedly a book by P.M. Cross (*Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) until it became completely worn out and every important point was underlined or highlighted. As I matured in my scholarship, I began to differ with him on several issues and to my utter surprise, he appreciated this and encouraged me to be my own scholar, which I have ultimately become.

[21] *Biblia Hebraica Stuttegartensia* (Hebrew Edition).

[22] Two key attributes of the J source are: anthropomorphism, the name of God in this text is Yahweh; the story is developing interestingly to the reader, and so on.

Abraham by the oak of Mamre as he was sitting at the entrance of his tent. Then immediately the text states that as he looked, he saw three men standing near him and that he ran from the tent entrance to meet them. But in v. 3 Abraham addresses only one man as *adoni*, "my lord." The fluctuation between the singular and the plural indicates the possibility that the redactor of this chapter merged two separate traditions into one narrative: the tradition in which Yahweh alone visited Abraham, and the other in which three deities visited Abraham. Several scholars have given their opinion on this narrative.[23] John Skinner suggests that "the three strangers were originally three deities, disguised as men, engaged in the function described in the lines of Homer (*Odyssey* xvii. 485 ff.):

> Καί τε θεοὶ ξείνοισιν ἐοικότες ἀλλοδαποῖσιν,
> παντοῖοι τελέθοντες, ἐπιστρωφῶσι πόληας,
> ἀνθρώπων ὕβριν τε καὶ εὐνομίην ἐφορῶντες.[24]

> Aye, and the gods in the guise of strangers
> From afar put on all manner of shapes, and
> Visit the cities, bolding the violence and
> The righteousness of men.[25]

Bible Translations

Looking up various Bible translations is the easiest and yet a quite illuminating step in doing biblical exegesis for a student who has not taken biblical languages. Translations teach the student about the problems that Bible translators face when translating a foreign language to English or any other language. In this step, the students must indicate the major differences in words or phrases that they see in parallel Bible versions. A sample comparison of Bible versions is illustrated in a chart

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[23] Gunkel, Skinner, von Rad, Claus Westermann, and others have suggested that Abraham's intercession is a later addition to the story. That is disputable. The present narrative is based on earlier tradition; but attempts to reconstruct earlier forms of the tradition are quite speculative (cf. Van Seters, *Abraham*, 210).

[24] John Skinner, (1910). *A critical and exegetical commentary on Genesis* (p. 302). New York: Scribner & Son.

[25] John Skinner, 302.

below. Students who are learning biblical exegesis for the first time are strongly encouraged to make a chart because it displays more clearly the major differences among versions of the text. The translation differences often indicate the difficult word(s) that may require an in depth study.

There are many Bible translations available these days. Therefore, one must compare how the word is translated in major Bible translations such as The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), The King James Version (KJV), the Jerusalem Bible (JB), the Septuagint (LXX = Greek Bible[26]), the Masoretic Text (MT = Hebrew Bible), the New International Bible (NIV), the New American Bible, and the Vulgate (Vulg = Latin Bible). If these Bible versions, that claim to have been translated from the original languages, differ sharply in their rendering of a certain word in English, then that word deserves thorough study. The divergent meanings are an indicator that translators are not in accord with what the word means in a given context.

Let us make a chart with columns to compare identical verses from the selected Bible versions. Under the name of each selected Bible version, we will type the parallel verses from each version. By highlighting the discrepancies in translations of the same word or phrase, it will be clear that certain words are either multifarious or obscure in meaning.

The earliest text in the Hebrew Bible that illustrates a good word study on *mishpat* is Genesis 18:17-25. Major Bible versions have translated *mishpat* differently. To narrow the focus, we will examine verses 19 and 25, where *mishpat* is identified by words or phrases written in italics and/or bold font in the chart below.

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[26] The Greek Bible is also available in the English translation.

MT	NRSV	LXX	KJV	JB
…keep the way of HaShem, **to do righteousness** and *justice*…	[19] … to keep the way of the Lord **by doing righteousness** and *justice*…	…keep the ways of the Lord, **to do justice** and *judgment*…	…keep the way of the Lord, **to do justice** and *judgment*…	…to maintain the way of Yahweh **by just** and *upright living*…
…Shall not the *shopet (Judge)* of all the earth not *do mishpat* (*right*)?	[25] …Shall not **the *Judge*** of all the earth *do what is just?"*	…Thou that **judgest** the whole earth, shalt thou not *do right?*	…Shall not **the Judge** of all the earth *do right?*	…Will **the judge** of whole earth not *administer justice?*

Highlights of the Study of Bible Translations

The chart above demonstrates that Bible translators have long encountered problems in translating the Hebrew word *mishpat* into the English language. The Hebrew phrase *la'asot mishpat* in verse 19 has been translated as "to do righteousness" (MT); "by doing righteousness" (NRSV); "to do justice" (LXX, KJV) and simply as "just" (JB). The Hebrew phrase in verse 25, *ya'aseh mishpat* has also been rendered in diverse ways. The MT translates it "do right"; while the other versions translate it "do what is just" (NRSV); "do right" (LXX, KJV) and "administer justice" (JB). The evidence before us suggests that the term *mishpat* is problematic. Thus, because these major Bible versions translate *mishpat* differently, it is self evident that *mishpat* should be thoroughly studied. The brief discussion below is simply to show how the *mishpat* requires exhaustive investigation to establish its best reading or meaning in a text.

Word Study ou *mishpat*

There are several ways to determine the word(s) that deserves an in depth study. The first determining factor is that the term must be a key word in the text/pericope. To know that it is a key term, scholars have

done some research and have published their findings in books, commentaries, or journals. The word, therefore, must appear in Bible commentaries and major dictionaries of the Bible. If the word is only defined in a word dictionary like *Webster's* or the *Oxford* dictionary, then it is not a key word in the pericope. Such a word has no particular history and has not been identified by previous scholars as significant or problematic.

The second indicator that a word deserves serious study is if it is used in different ways in cognate Semitic Languages.

The third way to determine an obscure or major word in a pericope is by comparing Bible translations. The discussion below illustrates how word study on *mishpat* may be done in an easy and clear way.

The Hebrew root *spt* from which *mishpat* is derived is *tpt* in Ugaritic and *spt* in Akkadian. In Ugaritic language the root *tpt* overwhelmingly refers to actions of the gods whereas in Akkadian literature *spt* applies to both humans and deities. But on closer scrutiny the usage of *spt/tpt* seems originally to have referred exclusively to the actions of the deities. When it was used for humans, it only referred to the actions of a leader who was appointed by the superior leader to govern (*spt/tpt*) the people or to command battle. This root usage is also the same in the Hebrew Bible, e.g., in the Book of Judges.[27] But later it was democratized to refer to humans as well.[28]

The term *mishpat* can be traced from the root *spt/tpt* in several cognate Semitic languages. The meaning of the root *spt* in Akkadian and its cognate *tpt* in Ugaritic is elucidated by a cursory examination of the usage of *spt* in the ancient history of Assyria, Canaan, and Carthaginian and Punic states.[29] The root study leads to the conclusion that the agent *spt* referred to an agent appointed by the senior authority to rule a territory or to function as a deputy of the senior authority. Scholars are generally agreed that *mishpat* is multifarious in meaning and its

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[27] To give one example, in Judg 3:10-11 we read: "The spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and fhe Lord gave King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. 11 So the land had rest forty years. The usage of the verb "judge" in this verse as in others like it means "to command an army."

[28] See T. Mafico, *Yahweh's Emergence as "Judge" among the Gods: A Study of the Hebrew Root spt.*, Edwin Mellen Press, (2007), 88-96.

[29] Ibid.

translations include "judgment," "justice," "what is right," "decision" and "custom" and several more. In the ancient Near East, *mishpat* and its cognates in Semitic languages is basically a divine attribute. It represented the essence of all that is indescribably good; it represented a state of equitability and justice to all people indiscriminately. It was a type of what I call "communal socialism" in which every person felt equal to another and wished the other to have what she had. A good example of this communal socialism is found in the Book of Acts 4:32-35 which reads:

> Now the whole group of those who believed [in Jesus] were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. 33 With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. [35] They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

The usage of the root *spt* also indicates that the final authority in deciding the fate of everything resided in the hands of the superior god or human leader. In Babylon it resided in the god Shamash who was head of the pantheon; and in Canaan it was the superior god El who was the plenipotentiary ruler. *Mishpat* was the prerogative of the superior ruler; and the superior ruler appointed the *shophet* in Israel and the *tapitu* in Canaan and the *shapitum* in Babylon and Assyria. The question then arises: when the Israelites referred to Yahweh as *shophet*, the God of *mishpat*, were they recognizing the existence of other gods to whom Yahweh was their superior authority?[30] Or, was the divine council collectively superior to Yahweh? Would that explain why Yahweh consulted the divine council each time he was announcing major action or event?[31] Based on our previous writings, the answers are positive.

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[30] Psalms 82 seems to confirm this line of thought.
[31] About the divine council, read also Gen 1:26; 11:1-11; Isa 6:8.

Form Criticism

The pericope begins with a divine soliloquy (Gen18:17-19) and Quickly transitions to a Yahweh-Abraham dialogue about Sodom. Several scholars have titled vv. 16-33 as "Abraham's plea for Sodom."[32] Based on our study of the usage of the Hebrew root *spt* and the Substantive *mishpat*, the pericope is not a plea for Sodom. This is highly disputable. Rather it is Abraham's question to Yahweh to explain how he would decide on a city inhabited by both the righteous few and the wicked majority. Thus the genre of this pericope is a rhetorical dialogue.

Redaction Criticism

Redaction criticism is an important step that demonstrates how texts have been used by redactors in contexts that may be different from those of the original writers. Students should first attempt to identify the original speaker and the subsequent editor(s) wherever possible. Writers can be identified by their writing style, word choice, themes, names they use, and by several other characteristics.[33] It is also important to seek the date and geographical location of the text because this often unveils the history of the times and the possible intention of the text to the audience of that time. The student will also see how the text has been redacted by different writers to suit their own changed times. A good example of how a redacted text may be quite different from the intention of the original author is found in the way Matthew 3:3 alters what Deutero-Isaiah 40:3 was referring to about the voice that was calling. Matthew writes:

> This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The *voice of one crying out in the wilderness*: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' "[34]

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[32] Wenham, G. J. (1998). *Genesis 16–50 Word Biblical Commentary* (Vol. 2, p. 40). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

[33] The Documentary Hypothesis, JEDP explains this better. For the New Testament, the texts of the Synoptic Gospels are different because of the theology of Jesus that the different authors had.

[34] Matt 3:3, italics are mine to indicate Matthews alteration of Deutero-Isaiah's statement..

Matthew has edited the text of Deutero-Isaiah to relate it to his announcement about John the Baptist. The voice that was crying is now attributed to John who is the harbinger of the savior to come. But in its original setting, Deutero-Isaiah was referring to an anonymous herald who was saying:

> A *voice cries out:*
> *"In the wilderness* prepare the way of the Lord,
> make straight *in the desert* a highway for our God

It is obvious that Matthew, who always supports his message by quoting the Old Testament, has altered the punctuation of this prophetic oracle in order to support his assertion that John the Baptist was Elijah. Because there was no such prophetic prediction of Elijah "calling" from the wilderness, Matthew redacted Isa 40:3 and punctuated it differently. The result is that the voice was heard crying in/from the wilderness: a complete reversal of what Deutero-Isaiah actually says.[35] What Matthew did with this verse shows that redactors utilized some texts taken from past literatures and contextualized them to relate to their own social contexts. For such reasons, the exegete must attempt to establish the source(s) from where the redactor took the text, the phrase, the idea, or the theology in the final text now before him. To do this, the exegete must, as already pointed out, apply source criticism to the text.

Source Criticism

Many of the biblical and extrabiblical texts are not in their original form. The New Testament has used texts from the Old Testament; and the Old Testament has used ancient documents of other nations and transformed or modified them to fit its writers' own social situations. By doing a comparative study of the pericope with intrabiblical and extrabiblical documents, the student will be able to trace the source of the redacted biblical text from earlier biblical texts or from

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[35] Hebrew had no punctuation, vowels, chapters or verse divisions. Therefore, vocalization was done later based on the context of the sentences. That is why Matthew punctuated Isaiah's oracle differently and still remained correct as far as the Hebrew text (unvocalized) was concerned.

ancient Near Eastern literatures, respectively. The theology or theme of the text will then identify why the redactor of that text selected and rearranged it to fit his theme in the current biblical text. The excursus we provide above summarizes some of the probable reasons for redacting the text we are studying in the Book of Genesis.

Summary of Major Exegetical Findings

Having done all the aforementioned critical steps, in the conclusion of an exegetical paper, I require the student to summarize the major lessons that she or he has learned from the exegetical exercise. Many students have reported how the exegetical approach had positively transformed their reading and understanding of the Bible.[36] They notice a major difference between how they studied and interpreted the Bible before they learned biblical exegesis and they report how exegesis has given them new ways of dealing with a text. Having learned how to do word study, they also report the joy of being able to preach on a single word taken from the text and teaching the congregation what the word originally meant in its ancient usage, and the different meanings it has acquired through time. Whereas many students assumed that sermon preparation was easy, after this exegetical course they realize that good preaching requires serious study of the Bible in order to fully contextualize the sermon for the spiritual enrichment of their audience.

Coutextualization: From Exegesis to Sermon

The final step in the exegetical exercise is an outline of how the student would develop the text that she has exegeted into a lesson for Bible study or into a sermon. The importance of this final step is to make students learn how to transition from exegesis as a method to its value as a tool that enables them to relate the ancient text to contemporary audiences. Students are reminded that they do not need to include all exegetical steps in a sermon or Bible lesson. Exegetical steps are simply tools that the pastor or teacher utilizes to comprehensively prepare the

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[36] In course of my writing this article, my former student, Jamil el Shair emailed me this" "You will be glad to know that I am using what you taught me. I think you will be happier to know that the people are responding. They even do the homework I give them to encourage them to dig deeper into the scriptures." LinkedIn Messaging dated December 12, 2015. See also footnote 7.

lesson. Therefore, each lesson will require one or several steps but not necessarily all of them.

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