

Description and Preparation Guidelines for the Open Book Bible Exegesis Examination

by the Bible Task Group of the PCCEC

The following comments are intended as helpful advice from the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee to candidates preparing to take the Open Book Biblical Exegesis Exam. These are not the specific instructions for the examination; those are found on the examination itself.

Description:

This examination shall assess the candidate's ability to interpret an assigned passage of Scripture by demonstrating attention to the original language of the text, an understanding of the text's historical context, and an ability to relate the text effectively to the contemporary life of the church in the world.

The candidate shall have access to Hebrew and Greek texts, translations, commentaries, and other exegetical tools. Using these, he or she shall provide a faithful interpretation of the passage, show how he or she arrived at this interpretation, and suggest how this passage might be used in the contemporary life of the church.

Purpose:

The purpose of the Open Book Bible Exegesis Examination within the overall preparation for ministry process is to serve as an assessment of a candidate's ability to apply academic training in biblical studies to contexts of ministry of Word and Sacrament. It is intended to supplement, not replicate, assessments of an ability to use Scripture in the practice of ministry within a Reformed Christian context that are completed as part of seminary courses in biblical studies and languages (G-14.0450c) and through the preparation of a formal exegetical study and sermon for the candidate's "final assessment" (see "Expected Outcomes of Candidacy," item f, in the *Advisory Handbook* for Committees on Preparation for Ministry, p. 11).

Consequently, the exegesis examination is designed to assess three areas:

1. Testing a candidate's knowledge about the text which leads to and sets limits on the possible interpretations and applications of that text.
2. Testing a candidate's ability to communicate the substance of careful, academically-informed biblical study, including interaction with the original languages, to those who have not had the opportunity for training in such fields.
3. Testing a candidate's ability to develop and support a faithful interpretation of some aspect of the text for application to the life of the community.

In order to better appreciate why these particular assessments are chosen, it is helpful to consider both the historical understanding of the interpretation of Scripture within the Reformed tradition and some current presuppositions in the discipline of biblical studies.

Rationale:

For much of the period since the Protestant Reformation, the interpretation of the Bible was guided by principles of historical-grammatical exegesis (often called “the historical-critical method”). Such interpretations were based on the assumption that it was possible to arrive at an objective understanding of “*the meaning*” of a scriptural passage through the rigorous study of the text in its original language and within its original historical context. That meaning could then be applied to the contemporary situation of the interpreter. This approach to exegesis received its classic formulation in Krister Stendahl’s article on “Biblical Theology” for *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*,¹ in which he described the twin purposes of biblical interpretation as determining the relationship between what a text “meant” and what it “means.”

The academic discipline of biblical studies has progressed over the past several decades in its understanding of how a text may be interpreted in more than one way. The notion that there is such a thing as “*the interpretation*” or “*the meaning*” of a biblical passage, or even that there might be closely paired interpretations of what it “meant” and “means,” is now considered too limited in describing the ways the church has heard God speak in and through the Scriptures. Even interpreters who employ more traditional critical methods now readily admit that there are multiple meanings when a passage is considered with regard to “its meaning *relative to what*” (theology, ethics, history, etc.), and that the choice of the “*what*” opens multiple possibilities for interpretation.

These changes in biblical studies do not challenge the use of Scripture within the church, but rather provide a theoretical support for the way the Bible is actually experienced and used within the Reformed tradition. While a Reformed understanding of Scripture would reject more radical literary theories - we believe there is not only a “what” of the text but a “who” of the Spirit that encounters us as an Other in the act of reading Scripture - it nevertheless acknowledges the multiple ways in which God has spoken in the past leading to the production of Scripture and continues to speak through the Scripture as seen in the confessional documents of the church and the ongoing life of the community.

This Reformed view of Scripture means that interpretations of the text both for the individual Christian and especially for the Christian community must be informed by a broad understanding about the text that both provides the foundation for and sets limits on those interpretations.² Any interpretations of Scripture from a Reformed perspective must take account of at least the following four areas:

1. *Language of the Text*: word meanings, grammar, literary and other features with respect to both its original language and its translation into the language of the modern community.
2. *Historical Situation*: the influence of the historical and cultural context in which the engagement between God and God’s people has come.

1 Krister Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” in George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962) 1:418-432, particularly section A.2 “What it meant and what it means” (419-420).

2 See the statements on “Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture” (123rd General Assembly of the PCUS, 1983) and “Biblical Authority and Interpretation” (194th General Assembly of the UPCUSA, 1982).

3. *Scriptural and Theological Context*: the passage's relation to the broad teaching of Scripture and theological tradition of the church.
4. *Significance for the Present Situation*: the application of the passage informed by points of correspondence between the original situation and the present one, guided by "the Rule of Love"—the commands to love God and neighbor (cf. Mark 12:28-32).

The "Open Book Bible Exegesis Examination" as directed by the *Book of Order* and the description of the examination approved by the General Assembly requires that a candidate develop and present a "faithful interpretation" of an assigned text and a plan for its use in a specific ministry context. By the phrase "faithful interpretation," the instructions for the examination mean one that is "consistent with the facts" (to take one standard definition of 'faithful') about the text's wording, its historical, social, canonical, and theological contexts, and so forth. Such an interpretation should fulfill the expectations for the use of Scripture as understood within the context of the Reformed tradition.

Structure:

Because the Open Book Bible Exegesis Examination is neither an academic exegesis paper nor practice for the exegesis and sermon requirement of "final assessment," it has its own particular components and arrangement. Candidates are required to address the assigned passage in terms of knowledge about the text, theological interpretation, and application to a specified ministry context. Candidates have a period of five days in which to complete the examination.

Each administration of the examination will present candidates with a choice of two passages (one each from the Old and the New Testament) together with a scenario reflecting a particular ministry context specific to each passage. These scenarios will culminate in production of a specific form of ministry work product, such as a sermon outline or lesson plan. Examples of such scenarios might include: "You will be preaching on this passage as part of a series of sermons on stewardship." "You will be using this passage with your confirmation class as it studies baptism." "You have been asked by the family to use this passage as the primary Scripture reading at their mother's funeral, and so it will serve as the scriptural basis for your funeral sermon." Candidates may choose either the Old or the New Testament passage but must formulate their responses for the ministry context specified with the particular passage.

The examination will have three major sections.

Section I - Language, Historical Situation, Scriptural and Theological Context:

This section tests knowledge "about the text" corresponding to the first three areas of a Reformed perspective on interpreting Scripture outlined above. The questions may be formulated so that they reflect issues likely to be raised in the context of ministry rather than merely scholarly debate. As examples: "Pastor, my NIV Bible doesn't say at all what you read from the NRSV this morning." "What was going on at the time that made Isaiah push Ahaz to ask for a sign that God would be with the people of Judah?"

A total of four responses will be required in this section of the examination, and there will be a 600-word limit per response. All candidates will be required to respond to three specified questions and will be permitted to select between an option of either A or B in the other response.

Section II - Presenting a “Faithful Interpretation”:

The second section of the exam responds to the final aspect of a Reformed perspective of Scripture - an application informed by points of correspondence between the present ministry context and the original setting of the passage. It will have two parts.

1. *Focus Statement:* Based on their broad study of the passage and not just the material presented in section I, candidates will write a 50-word statement about a central theme related to their “faithful interpretation” of the passage they will develop in the sermon, lesson plan, or other work product indicated in the ministry context specified for the passage. Candidates are encouraged to develop readings of the text that show their creative use of interpretational methods appropriate to the text.
2. *Supporting the Interpretation:* Candidates will write an essay presenting their “faithful interpretation” supporting the central theme in the focus statement by a careful and critical analysis of the text (1,200-word limit). This essay should draw on not only material in responses to the questions in Section I, but also exegetical methods and evidence relevant to the type of interpretation they provide. It will be assessed by the readers based upon its coherence, consistency, clarity, and whether it persuasively supports the focus statement regarding their “faithful interpretation” of the passage.

Section III - Application:

In this final section of the exam the candidate presents the sermon, lesson plan, etc. required by the ministry context specified for the particular passage. This section of the examination will be assessed on clarity, consistency with preceding sections of the exam, appropriateness for the specified context, and so forth.

General Guidelines for Preparation:

Double-space your text. For the convenience of readers, the main body of your essay answers should be double-spaced; outlines (including sermon outlines and lesson plans, as well as other short outlines within the body of the essays) may be single-spaced.

Label your answers. Be sure to identify your essays in a manner consistent with the section and number of the question. Within Section I label your answers “First Required Response,” etc., and indicate “A” or “B” where appropriate. Identify the parts of Section II by number. It is not necessary to include a repetition of the question, although you may do so if you wish. If sections of the exam are not clearly labeled, the exam will be returned ungraded.

Remember your audience. Readers of the ordination exams are both ministers of Word and Sacrament and elders, and with differing levels of familiarity with the language and tools of exegesis. While some have academic specialization in biblical studies, most do not. Write simply and directly. Avoid excessive use of technical terms, but be precise in your descriptions of grammar and syntax. Keep in mind that a primary purpose of the examination is to assess your ability to communicate the substance of careful, academically-informed biblical study, including interaction with the original languages, to those who have not had the opportunity for formal training in these fields.