

When Exegesis Emigrated or, When Eisegesis Immigrated or, When a Preacher’s Perspective on Politics Prevailed Over Reason

By Patrick Swayne

First of all, kudos to you for beginning to read an article with such a convoluted and potentially confusing title. I don’t typically go out of my way to be convoluted or confusing (it comes fairly naturally to me), but I have done so now to give myself the opportunity to explain myself.

Please keep reading!

Making Sense of Exegesis, Eisegesis, Immigration, and Emigration

Even though you might not be familiar with the term exegesis or eisegesis, you should be familiar with what they mean, as one of them is absolutely necessary in Bible study and one of them is incredibly dangerous. Without giving you a dictionary definition, exegesis is an explanation of a message that involves taking out (for you etymology buffs – all 11 of you – “ex” corresponds to the Greek word ek, meaning “out of”) what the author originally put there. Eisegesis, on the other hand, involves putting in (“eis” corresponds to eis, “into”) to a message what the author never intended. Simply put, exegesis is taking the author at his word and eisegesis is taking the author at your word.

Can you see the relevance here in relation to Bible study? Exegesis is what we must do in order to actually get the message that God intended, whereas eisegesis is what we are tempted to do every time we approach the word. To understand God’s word properly is to understand that there is something that he put there for you to get – one thing, not anything and certainly not everything.

Alright, let’s get to the emigration, immigration, and politics portion of the title. A couple more explanations might be in order because I do typically go out of my way when assonance and alliteration are available and accessible – ha! – even though this might not be the most effective way to communicate. So, emigration is the process of permanently leaving something (typically a country) and immigration is the process of permanently arriving somewhere (i.e. moving with the intention of not going home). You emigrate to immigrate – don’t you love the English language?

Exegesis, Eisegesis, and the Current Immigration Debate

There’s more to this title than literary devices. You’re probably aware of the debate raging right now over illegal immigrants in the United States. The purpose of this article is not to weigh in on this debate either in terms of the political level (what the government should do) or the personal level (what Christians should do), but to use this issue as an illustration of what Christians shouldn’t do when studying their Bibles.

So, a group of preachers was asked the question, “Would it be wrong for a church to harbor illegal immigrants and protect them from deportation?” It’s not such a theoretical question, given at least one denominational organization has already purposed to do so. Surprisingly (to me at least), several preachers were in favor of doing so and compared protecting illegal immigrants in the USA to protecting Jews in Nazi Germany (note: this thought is probably not original to them). What surprised me even more was when one of these preachers said that God actually supports the setting aside of laws, even His Law, to show mercy to a worthy immigrant.

Civil Disobedience in the Book of Ruth?

Let me sum up his reasoning as I understood it. Deuteronomy 23:3 clearly states, “An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the LORD forever.” Verse 6 adds, “You shall not seek their peace nor their prosperity all your days forever.” So, God’s rule on Moabite immigration into the Israelite nation as well as his policy for foreign aid seems to be none forever.

But wait, there’s more. You’ve heard the story of Ruth, right? Ruth was a Moabitess, but she immigrated to Israel (*gasp*), she received aid from Boaz, an Israelite (*double gasp*), and David was her descendent (*literally passed out*). So, the preacher’s conclusion to this seeming contradiction is as follows: God must approve of people helping and receiving at least some immigrants even when it is against the law, His Law, to do so. The application he drew was that it must be equally lawful for us to set aside the law of the land regarding immigrants in the name of mercy.

There’s one big problem with this line of reasoning – the Bible doesn’t say anywhere that Ruth was meant to be a case study in immigration issues or that Boaz was in any way acting contrary to the commandments of Deuteronomy 23.

Now, before you dismiss this line of reasoning altogether (or argue against doing so because you know what I’m about to say), I should point out that an important tool in proper exegesis is inference. Inference can be described as drawing whatever conclusions are warranted by the evidence. The Bible is not a dictionary or encyclopedia – all the information about a given subject is often not given in one place. Discovering God’s will is often an exercise of harmonizing passages of Scripture, extracting principles from historical accounts, discovering the interplay between precepts and principles, etc. So, is the above inference warranted by the evidence? Is the preacher guilty of eisegesis, or has he properly practiced exegesis?

Examining Two Solutions to Contradictions Between Law and History

There are two things that you can do with Bible contradictions, particularly contradictions between God’s Law and human behavior. You can 1) explain away the contradiction by assuming a higher principle trumps the Law in a given situation or 2) seek an explanation that removes the contradiction.

#1 is an incredibly popular thing to do these days. In fact, people think Jesus and His disciples set a standard for doing so. Jesus healed people and His disciples plucked grain to eat on the Sabbath, flagrantly disregarding the Law of Moses in doing so. It was OK to do so, because Jesus needed to heal those people and because His disciples were hungry.

Really?

If it really was Law breaking to do what Jesus and His disciples did but it was OK because they needed to do so (because really, people that have been lame or blind or suffering a withered hand all of their lives can't wait a day to get better, and everyone knows grown men can't go 24 hours without eating), then what act of Law breaking can't be explained away by need?

It's not the first time that people have argued along these lines. "Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods," the Corinthians said; anything our body needs, including (given the context) sexual release, is OK! However, Paul responded, "But God will destroy both it and them" (1 Corinthians 6:13). God's will always trumps human need. This whole idea that God sets aside a Law that He created when some mysterious higher principle drifts into view is ludicrous.

The Bible does acknowledge higher principles, but pay close attention to what Jesus says about them in relation to specific commands:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone" (Matthew 23:23).

Principles don't allow man the liberty to excuse precepts. Both are important, even if the precept involves something very small.

Ok, I know I'm digressing, but I hope you can see that it was (at least somewhat) purposeful. It simply is not a good idea to assume that a God who said, "I do not change" (Malachi 3:6) is going to change what He expects of us just because we think a "higher principle" might be involved. I emphasize "we think" because that's where all of this has come from. God never said that a higher principle overrode His Law, let alone when a higher principle might do so.

While I'm sure that this preacher loved the Lord, the simple fact was that he practiced eisegesis – putting something into the Bible that simply wasn't there. The safer thing to do would be to have taken option #2 in response to the apparent contradiction between Boaz's behavior and God's law – to seek an explanation that removes the contradiction.

3 Possible Explanations of Ruth That Don't Involve a Contradiction

There are at least three explanations of the text that remove any possibility of a contradiction:

1. Bible historians withheld their commentary.

The inspired authors of the Bible's historical books generally don't say whether what someone did was good or bad. While we assume Boaz' behavior was righteous, Boaz was living in a time in which "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6; Judges 21:25). As the Bible never gives its approval to what Boaz did, it's possible that Boaz was a product of his own place and time. This explanation is the least favorable of three for a number of reasons, the first of which is that it doesn't explain why David, a descendant of a Moabite, was allowed into the house of the Lord (and even got to celebrate it in a Psalm if the attribution is right – Psalm 122:1).

2. Forever doesn't mean forever.

The Bible says that Moabites were to be forbidden from entering the assembly of the Lord forever (Deuteronomy 23:3, 6), but in the context specifies, "even to the tenth generation" (v. 3). So, which has the greater sway over interpretation: "forever" over "tenth," or "tenth" over "forever"? Even if it could be argued that "tenth" here is to be interpreted differently than "third" in the context (v. 8), a study of the word "forever" in the Old Testament would show that the word was often used to emphasize length, not necessarily to imply eternity.

If forever always meant forever, we would still be living under the Old Law (e.g. Exodus 27:21). This explanation suffers from the same problem as the one above though, and can only avoid doing so by assuming that there are gaps in the genealogy from Ruth to David (which, like assuming Boaz acted against God's Law, requires you to believe what the Bible doesn't say).

3. Ruth was a proselyte.

Later Scriptures acknowledge the presence of proselytes (religious converts) to the Jewish faith (Matthew 23:15; Acts 2:10). Was Ruth one of these proselytes? Consider Ruth's own words to her mother-in-law Naomi (a full-blooded Jew) when Naomi encouraged her to return to her people and her gods:

"Entreat me not to leave you, Or to turn back from following after you; For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, And your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, And there will I be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also, If anything but death parts you and me" (Ruth 1:16, 17).

It couldn't be any clearer that Ruth wanted to give up her people and her gods in favor of the Jewish people and their God. The question though is this – did God let her? Did the curse he pronounced in Deuteronomy 23 apply to penitent, truth seeking Moabites or only those Moabites who refused to give up their people and their gods? Isaiah seems to make God's position on the subject pretty clear:

"Do not let the son of the foreigner Who has joined himself to the LORD Speak, saying, "The LORD has utterly separated me from His people"; Nor let the eunuch say, "Here I am, a dry

tree.” For thus says the LORD: “To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, And choose what pleases Me, And hold fast My covenant, Even to them I will give in My house And within My walls a place and a name Better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name That shall not be cut off. “Also the sons of the foreigner Who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, And to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants—Everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, And holds fast My covenant— Even them I will bring to My holy mountain, And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices Will be accepted on My altar; For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations” (Isaiah 56:3-7).

It stands to reason that Ruth was received in the same way that God promised to receive the faithful of all nations.

Wrapping It All Up

All that it takes to disprove a contradiction is to provide a possible solution. As you can see, there are at least three possible explanations, one of which is in total harmony with what the Bible says elsewhere.

When we are faced with a choice between a conclusion that sees God becoming a God of unknown exceptions and situation ethics and a conclusion that sees God acting in harmony with His will, which should we choose? Eisegetes choose the former, but exegetes know that “Scripture cannot be broken” and choose the latter (John 10:35).

Ruth is not a story of Boaz sheltering an illegal immigrant and God being OK with it because she was a worthy woman; if anything, it is a story of Boaz graciously receiving a legal immigrant. However, even to describe it as that is to impress upon Ruth our 21st century understanding of the way things work. If Ruth wanted to immigrate to America, she would have a stack of forms to fill out, a ton of fees to pay, and a long wait to endure (trust me, I know!). However, to immigrate to Israel, she simply had to put her wholehearted faith in God. She did, and thank God she did (Matthew 1:5).

Don’t let politics, peer pressure, or personal biases lead you to try to put in the Bible what simply doesn’t belong.