

The Power of Careful Observation:

Why We Do Exegesis

In 1606, King James granted a charter to a group of settlers to found the Virginia Colony in the new world. The colony, in its first ten years, had 75,000 pounds of backing and 2,000 settlers. The land was lush and fertile and great things were expected. The reality was much more harsh. Only 105 of the 144 sent survived the journey, arriving April, and by the end of the following January, when a supply ship arrived, only 38 were still alive. This was due in part to the natural conditions, such a swampy land and poor water. It also is thought to be due to poor governance—there was no strong central authority to ensure settlers acted for the good of the colony, and as a result not enough crops were grown to provide food to last the winter, so they were forced to go begging to the native Americans, who were happy to starve them out. That winter they were reduced to eating livestock and finally rats and mice, and even boiling shoe leather. One man was executed for partially consuming his murdered wife. This pattern continued until May 1610, when only 60 of 500 settlers survived the winter, and those could have served as anatomical models.

Even ten years after its founding, things were not much improved. A new governor, Samuel Argall, arrived to find the colony little more than a slum, describing it as follows:

“but five or six houses [remaining standing], the church downe, the palizado's [stockade fence] broken, the bridge in pieces, the well of fresh water spoiled, the storehouse they used for the church, the marketplace and streets and all other spare places planted with tobacco.”

Of the 2000 settlers sent in 1607 only 400 remained alive and only 200 of them were either trained or fit enough to farm.

Determined to turn the colony around, the leader of the backers in England changed the system of governance. Now settlers would be granted their own land and required to feed themselves using it. Whereas previously settlers might slack off and require others to do the work, now each man's fate depended on his hard work. The governor was empowered to make new laws, centralizing the authority in a way which had been lacking. This succeeded in driving up immigration, and 3,750 people were added to an initial population of 700.

By 1622, however, the colony's population was still about 700 people. Accounting for migration, those slain by native attacks, 3,000 of the settlers died, and it's not immediately obvious why. This represents a death rate of 75-80%, far worse than even the plague years in Europe, and far worse than Plymouth's first and worst year.

There was disease, with contaminated wells leading to typhoid. There were more immigrants and the colony could support. These account for much of the losses, but still can't account for the full devastation, especially bearing in mind these were generally young, healthy settlers. It only took about two weeks out of the year to plant and harvest a year's worth of corn. Yet somehow the governor is recorded as actually *requiring by law* that the settlers plant corn. This is another part of the puzzle. Why would a law be necessary?

Here's why I like this account: it all hinges on simple observation of the text. The way this all fits together goes back to Argall's earlier description from 1617 of the state of the colony. Remember he said he found tobacco planted everywhere, even in the streets? Tobacco was hard to cultivate and certainly didn't just spring up. It also required hay to prepare it, which meant less fodder for livestock. But it did give an immense profit. The settlers were literally starving themselves in order to grow more tobacco.

I think of this account when I do exegesis. You can read the text and notice little, learning nothing from it. But careful observations and analysis can open up a wealth of insight. The same is true of the biblical text. The most powerful tool of exegesis is not esoteric Greek or a stack of commentaries but simple, careful, repeated observation of the text.

Tonight we will do something we've never done. We will do an inductive study of the text. I will talk briefly about the method, then we will dive in, first diving up the initial portion of the letter into paragraphs and then marking up those paragraphs. I am anticipating about 15 minutes in that process, which will be done in sub groups, followed by our gathering together to share our observations.

Following that we will share the questions we came up with during the process and discuss those. I have brought along two questions of my own which we can also look at.

Why are we doing this? In part because it is sustainable—I can lead this with less prep time than a typical study. It restricts us a little—books like Job or Hosea wouldn't work well with this sort of a group process. And this won't result in the same sorts or quality of questions as we normally get. But it *does* get *each* of us into the text more deeply than we would normally go. My bother in his cell group, and my brother-in-law the equipping pastor, with his Sunday school class, use this method and get a lot out of it.

At some point it needs to be pointed out that some seem to have gotten the impression that preparing for study is primarily about working through a stack of commentaries. This is misleading. Understanding of the passage primarily comes through the exegesis. But the exegesis doesn't necessarily lead to good discussion questions. The commentaries are useful for this, since reading commentaries is akin to swapping ideas with other readers to get their view of the passage.

For more information on the historical example given above, see *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* by Davidson and Lytle.