Doing an exegetical exercise and writing an exegetical essay

One way of doing a exegetical exercise, or completing an exegetical essay, is to follow these steps:

1. Give a brief summary of the content of the passage and its main thrust; that is, describe what it is about, and what is the main point, or what are the main points, it is making.

2. Account for the place of the passage in the overall development of the Gospel. This may be restricted to the local context; that is, what is the passage’s place in this particular chapter, or stretch of text? Or the passage may be placed more broadly as to its position in the Gospel as a whole.

3. Identify and discuss the main (generally 3 or 4) exegetical problems in the text.

4. Discuss the theological/historical/literary issues and problems raised by the text.

5. Outline the theological themes addressed by the text.

6. Briefly discuss how these theological themes, or the exegetical issues, relate to the (your) contemporary context.

The steps given above may also provide you with a useful framework when constructing an exegetical essay. But they do not need to be followed exactly in that order. For instance, you may wish to begin by outlining and discussing some of the main exegetical problems in the passage, after an introduction and brief account of the context. This could then lead to a discussion of the passage as a whole in terms of its place in the overall context of the Gospel, and the theological/historical/literary issues and the theological themes that arise from it. Or, you may wish to weave discussion of the main exegetical problems into the discussion of theological/historical/literary issues where they are relevant.

Regarding step 6: It is good to indicate how the passage relates to the modern context. But this should be brief (and in an exegetical essay, should not amount to more than 10% of the overall number of words). You are not writing a sermon: rather you are doing the background, preparatory work. In exegesis, you are trying to understand the passage in its original context and as it stands in the Gospel.\(^1\)

Steps 3 – 5 should be regarded as forming the main part of the essay. The most number of words should be devoted to dealing with these aspects. Remember that

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\(^1\) Of course, ‘original context’ also includes the fact that the New Testament was originally written in Greek. Commentaries written in English are usually based either on the English text (as, for example, is B. Lindars' commentary in the New Century Bible Series) or on the Greek text (as, for example, is C.K. Barrett’s, *The Gospel according to St. John*, SPCK, 2nd edn, 1978). Commentaries also differ in giving the Greek in Greek script or transliterated (that is the Greek is put into the English alphabet e.g. *logos* [“word”], *monogenhs @uios* [“only Son”]), compare, for example, Beasley-Murray in the Word Biblical Commentary series, and Raymond E. Brown in the Anchor Bible series.
you are still going to have to be selective about the material you use. Some exegetical problems will be more important than others in gaining an overall understanding of the passage. Depending on the passage, it may be that historical issues are to be highlighted over against literary issues, or vice versa. You must decide what weight is to be given to the different aspects, and, therefore, how much attention you devote to them.

Last but not least, exegesis is as much an art as a science; in fact, it is more of an art than a science. This means that there is, finally, no one definitive way to do exegesis. Each person will develop her or his own style and method. There are general principles to follow in doing exegesis; but no exact "steps" to follow as when you do a scientific experiment or bake a cake.

There are dozens of books on the exegesis and interpretation of the New Testament. If you want to do some further reading, here are a few suggestions:


For John's Gospel look at:

And for a good introduction to some of the issues involved in interpreting the Bible generally, and the New Testament in particular, see:

(See especially, chapters 5 & 6 for issues pertinent to studying John's Gospel).