

HOW TO
UNDERSTAND AND APPLY
THE OLD TESTAMENT



TWELVE STEPS FROM EXEGESIS TO THEOLOGY

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P R E F A C E



An Overview of the Book

This year, 2017, marks the five hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of his Ninety-five Theses (October 31, 1517)—the spark that enflamed a global Reformation that is still alive and advancing today. The book you are now reading falls within and builds on this great gospel tradition, celebrating *sola Scriptura*—that Scripture *alone* stands as our highest authority in all matters of doctrine and practice.

Jesus loved the Old Testament. Indeed, it was his only Bible, and he believed that it pointed to him. I wrote this book to help believers better study, practice, and teach the Old Testament as *Christian Scripture*. I view God's inerrant Word as bearing highest authority in our lives, and I want Christians everywhere to interpret all of the Bible with care, celebrating the continuities between the Testaments while recognizing that Christ changes so much. I want to help Christians understand and apply the Old Testament in a way that nurtures hope in the gospel and that magnifies our Messiah in faithful ways.

This book targets both laypeople who don't know Hebrew and students studying the Old Testament in the original languages. This book is for anyone who wants to learn how to observe carefully, understand accurately, evaluate fairly, feel appropriately, act rightly, and express faithfully God's revealed Word, especially as embodied in the Old Testament. Through this book you will:

- Learn a twelve-step process for doing exegesis and theology;
- See numerous illustrations from Scripture that model the various interpretive steps;
- Consider how new covenant believers are to appropriate the Old Testament as Christian Scripture; and
- Celebrate the centrality of Christ and the hope of the gospel from the initial three-fourths of our Bible.

Two of the distinctive contributions of this book are its focus on discourse analysis (tracking an author’s flow of thought) and biblical theology (considering how Scripture fits together and points to Christ). Some of the practical questions that I will seek to answer include:

- What are Christians to do with Old Testament laws? Do any of Moses’ requirements still serve as guides for our pursuit of Christ?
- How should Christians consider Old Testament promises, especially those related to physical provision and protection? Can we really sing, “Every promise in the Book is mine”?¹
- How does the Old Testament point to Christ and the hope of the gospel? How could Paul, who preached from the Old Testament, say, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2)?

I originally drafted this book in preparation for a course titled Old Testament Exegesis that I taught for Logos Mobile Ed in a studio at the Faithlife headquarters in Bellingham, Washington, in summer 2015. My colleague Andy Naselli taught the companion New Testament Exegesis course, and both are available at <https://www.logos.com/product/117883/mobile-ed-biblical-exegesis-bundle>. At the end of that process, John Hughes and the P&R Publishing team invited Andy and me to publish counterpart volumes, which are fraternal twins in every way—conceptually, structurally, theologically, and pedagogically.

A Guide to Using the Book

Every level in the study of God’s Word includes beauties to discover and challenges to overcome. Recognizing that not every interpreter is the same, I have written this book with three tracks.



Easy



Moderate



Challenging

Level 1—Easy makes up most of the book and is for all readers. For *beginning interpreters*, this track may be the only one you will take, since it includes no exposure to biblical Hebrew. It will, however, still contain numerous exegetical and theological paths and vistas that will instruct, awe, inspire, and motivate.

1. The Sensational Nightingales, “Every Promise in the Book Is Mine,” *Let Us Encourage You* (Malco Records, 2005; orig. 1957).

Level 2—Moderate is also for all readers and does not require a knowledge of biblical Hebrew. It does, however, interact with the original language where beneficial for *intermediate interpreters*. I always translate the Hebrew and try to instruct clearly. Here you will gain exposure to some of the benefits of Hebrew exegesis and will learn how even those without Hebrew can profit greatly from important interpretive tools.

Level 3—Challenging is specialized for more *advanced interpreters* who know or are learning biblical Hebrew. These sections likely include technical discussions that will substantially benefit only those with some awareness of the original language and who will use their Hebrew Bibles for study.

Throughout the book I use the three symbols above to identify the difficulty level of each section or subsection. Decide what path you want to travel, and follow my lead. At the head of every chapter I also include a “Trail Guide” that will remind you where you are in the journey from exegesis to theology and that will give you a quick overview of the paths you are about to tread.

Even if you don’t know Hebrew, I encourage you to work through all Level 2—Moderate material, for the exegetical and theological payoff will be rich and the discussions should not be beyond your grasp. If you choose this path, just remember that all Level 1 material is also for you. For those who are studying or have studied Hebrew, *every part* of this book is for you, and my hope is that it will remind, clarify, and instruct, leading you into more focused, richer engagement with God and the biblical text.

At the end of every chapter I include “Key Words and Concepts,” “Questions for Further Reflection,” and “Resources for Further Study.” I hope these additions will benefit personal study, small-group discussions, and classroom use. The back of the book also includes a full glossary of the key terms, along with The KINGDOM Bible Reading Plan, a selected bibliography, the Index of Scripture, and the Index of Subjects and Names.

As we set out on our journey into biblical interpretation, may God the Father, by his Spirit, stir your affections for Christ and awaken your mind to think deeply. May you increase your skill at handling the whole Bible for the glory of God and the good of his church among the nations.

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INTRODUCTION

A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY AND ENCOUNTER



“The good hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” (Ezra 7:9–10)





| Basic Overview | |
|--|---|
| The Interpretive Task |  |
| Ten Reasons That the Old Testament Is Important for Christians |  |
| The Benefits of Hebrew Exegesis |  |
| Overview of the Interpretive Process: TOCMA |  |

Fig. 0.1. Trail Guide to Introduction

WE ARE ABOUT to embark on a journey of discovery and divine encounter. Beauty abounds at every turn, and the goal is to worship the living God in the face of Jesus Christ. What we call the Old Testament was the only Bible that Jesus had. Books such as Genesis and Deuteronomy, Isaiah and Psalms guided his life and ministry as the Jewish Messiah. It was these “Scriptures” that Jesus identified as God’s Word (Mark 7:13; 12:36), considered to be authoritative (Matt. 4:3–4, 7, 10; 23:1–3), and called people to know and believe in order to guard against doctrinal error and, even worse, hell (Mark 12:24; Luke 16:28–31; 24:25; John 5:46–47). Jesus was convinced that what is now the initial three-fourths of our Christian Bible “cannot be broken” (John 10:35).¹ He was also certain that the Old Testament bore witness about him (Luke 24:27, 46;

1. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations within the *body* text of the book are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations *within examples* are the author’s own.

John 5:39, 46), that it would be completely fulfilled (Matt. 5:17–18; Luke 24:44), and that it called for repentance and forgiveness of sins to be proclaimed in his name to all nations (Luke 24:47). I love the Old Testament because of the way it portrays God’s character and actions and serves as a witness to the majesty of our Messiah. The Old Testament is the initial three-fourths of God’s special revelation to us, and I want you to interpret the Old Testament rightly because there is no higher need for mankind than to see and celebrate the Sovereign, Savior, and Satisfier disclosed in its pages.

The Interpretive Task



This book is designed to guide Christians in interpreting the Old Testament. The process of *biblical interpretation* includes both exegesis and theology. The former focuses mostly on analysis, whereas the latter addresses synthesis and significance.²

Our English term *exegesis* is a transliteration of the Greek noun ἐξήγησις (ἐκ “from, out of” + ἔγω “to bring, move [something]”), meaning an “account, description, narration.” Narrowly defined, exegesis of Scripture is the personal discovery of what the biblical authors intended their texts to mean.³ Texts convey meaning; they do not produce it. Rather, following God’s leading, the biblical authors purposely wrote the words they did with specific sense and purpose. “Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). We have to carefully read what the Lord through his human servants gives us in Scripture. Exegesis is about discovering what is there, which includes both the specific meaning that the authors convey and its implications—those inferences in a text of which the authors may or may not have been unaware but that legitimately fall within the principle or pattern of meaning that they willed.⁴

2. For these distinctions, see Andrew David Naselli, “D. A. Carson’s Theological Method,” *SBET* 29, 2 (2011): 256–72; cf. D. A. Carson, “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 65–95, 368–75, repr. in D. A. Carson, *Collected Writings on Scripture*, comp. Andrew David Naselli (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 111–49; Carson, “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 39–76; Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” *NDBT* 89–104.

3. The term ἐξήγησις shows up in one Greek manuscript of Judges 7:15: “As soon as Gideon heard the telling [i.e., the narration, τὴν ἐξήγησιν] of the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped.” This context associates exegesis with the mere description of the dream, which stands distinct from the assessment of the dream’s meaning. Today, exegesis of written material usually implies some level of interpretation, but the stress is still significant that exegesis is about carefully reading what is there in the biblical text.

4. For more on this, see Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 30–38; Stein, “The Benefits of an Author-Oriented Approach to Hermeneutics,” *JETS* 44, 3 (2001): 451–66; G. K. Beale, “The Cognitive Peripheral Vision of the Biblical Authors,” *WTJ* 76, 2 (2014):

The English term *theology* comes from the Latin *theologia*, which derives from a combination of the Greek nouns θεός (“God”) and λόγος (“a formal accounting, reckoning”). In short, theology is a “reasoning or study of God.” Because Scripture is God’s Word for all time and because every biblical passage has a broader context (historical, literary, and biblical), exegesis (narrowly defined) naturally moves us into various theological disciplines:

- Biblical theology considers how God’s Word connects together and climaxes in Christ.
- Systematic theology examines what the Bible teaches about certain theological topics.
- Practical theology details the proper Christian response to the Bible’s truths.

Biblical interpretation is not complete until it gives rise to application through a life of worship. Exegesis moves to theology, and the whole process is to result in a personal encounter with the living God disclosed in Scripture. Doxology—the practice of glorifying or praising God—should color *all* biblical study.

In this book, chapters 1–9 cover the basics of exegesis, whereas chapters 10–12 address theology. Here are a number of foundational presuppositions that guide my approach to biblical interpretation.

1. Biblical interpretation necessitates that we view Scripture as God’s Word.

The only way to truly arrive at what the biblical authors intended is to believe (as they did) that they were reading and writing God’s very Word (Isa. 8:20; 1 Cor. 2:13; 14:37). This requires a submissive disposition to Scripture’s authority. We must be willing to let our understanding and application of truth be conformed to the Bible’s declarations, all in accordance with God’s revealed intention. The Bible is *special revelation*—God’s disclosure of himself and his will in a way that we can understand (1 Cor. 14:37; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20–21). The very words, and not just the ideas, are God-inspired (Matt. 5:17–18; 1 Cor. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). And the “words of the LORD are pure” (Ps. 12:6); his “law is true” (Ps. 119:142); “every one of [his] righteous rules endures forever” (Ps. 119:160); and his “commandments are right” (Ps. 119:172). Jesus said, “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35), and Paul said that this is so because “all Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). Indeed, as Peter said, “No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21).

The implication of these truths is that Scripture is both authoritative and accurate in all it declares. In order to stress that the Bible’s assertions are both reliable and unerring, the church has historically stated that (a) in matters of *faith* (doctrine) and *practice* (ethics), Scripture’s teaching is *infallible*—a sure and safe guide, and that (b) in matters

263–93, esp. 266–70; cf. G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden but Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Divine Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 340–64, esp. 344–47.

of *fact* (whether history, chronology, geography, science, or the like), Scripture's claims are *inerrant*—entirely true and trustworthy.⁵ Both terms mean something comparable but address different spheres, and both are rightly understood only in relation to what the authors, led by the Spirit, intended to convey by their texts (for more on this, see “History, Myth, and the Biblical Narratives” in chapter 1). The key for us is that the Bible will never lead us astray and should bear highest influence in our lives.

2. Biblical interpretation assumes that Scripture's truths are knowable.

Proper understanding of Scripture assumes that the Bible is, by nature, clear in what it teaches. In short, truth can be known. Peter recognized that “there are some things in [Paul's letters] that are hard to understand,” but he went on to say that it is “the ignorant and unstable” who “twist” these words “to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:16). The psalmists were convinced that God's Word enlightens our path and imparts understanding (Ps. 119:105, 130). Paul wrote his words plainly (2 Cor. 1:13) and called others to “think over” what he said, trusting that “the Lord will give you understanding in everything” (2 Tim. 2:7). I will comment further on Scripture's clarity in “Shared Assumptions and the Bible's Clarity” in chapter 8.

3. Biblical interpretation requires that we respond appropriately.

The process of biblical interpretation is not complete once we have discovered what God has spoken. We must then move on to recognize that his Word is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). We must grasp not only the biblical author's intended meaning (which is possible for nonbelievers) but also his intended effect (possible only for believers, Rom. 8:7–8; 1 Cor. 2:14). We thus pray *IOUS*: “*Incline* [our] heart[s] to your testimonies” (Ps. 119:36); “*Open* [our] eyes that [we] may behold wondrous things out of your law” (119:18); “*Unite* [our] heart[s] to fear your name” (86:11); and “*Satisfy* us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (90:14).⁶

John Piper has helpfully captured the sixfold process of education:⁷

- *Observe* carefully;
- *Understand* rightly;
- *Evaluate* fairly;
- *Feel* appropriately;

5. The “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” (1978) states: “*Infallible* signifies the quality of neither misleading nor being misled and so safeguards in categorical terms the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe, and reliable rule and guide in all matters. Similarly, *inerrant* signifies the quality of being free from falsehood or mistake and so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions. We affirm that canonical Scripture should always be interpreted on the basis that it is infallible and inerrant” (<http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html>).

6. John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 151.

7. John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 191–98. Piper actually applies the same process to both general revelation (God's world) and special revelation (God's Word).

- *Apply* wisely;
- *Express* articulately and boldly.

These are the necessary habits of the heart and mind needed for rightly grasping all truth in God’s Book.

4. Biblical interpretation that culminates in application demands God-dependence.⁸

The process of moving from study to practice is something that only God can enable, and he does so only through Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul writes, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” By “understand” here, Paul means “embrace, affirm, align with, delight in, apply.” Only in Christ is the veil of hardness toward God’s Word taken away (2 Cor. 3:14), but in Christ, the Word becomes near us, in our mouth and in our heart (Rom. 10:8). The biblical authors’ ultimate intent included a transformed life, the foundation of which is a personal encounter with the living God. This will not be experienced apart from the Lord’s help.

This book describes a process of Old Testament interpretation that is intended for the glory of God and the good of his people. Putting the Bible under a microscope (careful study) should always result in finding ourselves under its microscope, as Scripture changes us more into Christ’s likeness. We engage in exegesis and theology in order to encounter God. We approach humbly and dependently and never with manipulation or force. Biblical interpretation should create servants, not kings.

To this end, I invite you to pray the following words to the Lord:

You have said, O Lord, “But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2). I want you to look toward me, Father, so overcome my pride, arrest my affections, and move me to revere you rightly. May I approach the Bible with a heart ready to conform, a heart awed by the fact that you have spoken in a way that I can understand, and a heart hungry to receive. Enable this book to guide me well, and help me to learn how to study, how to live out, and how to proclaim your Word with care, humility, and confidence. In the name of King Jesus, I pray. Amen.

8. For more on this theme, see John Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

Ten Reasons That the Old Testament Is Important for Christians



If Christians are part of the new covenant, why should we seek to understand and apply the Old Testament? While I will develop my response in chapter 12, I will give ten reasons here why the first word in the phrase *Old Testament* must not mean “unimportant or insignificant to Christians.”

1. The Old Testament was Jesus’ only Scripture and makes up three-fourths (75.55 percent) of our Bible.

If space says anything, the Old Testament matters to God, who gave us his Word in a Book. In fact, it was his first special revelation, which set a foundation for the fulfillment that we find in Jesus in the New Testament. The Old Testament was the only Bible of Jesus and the earliest church (e.g., Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:44; Acts 24:14; 2 Tim. 3:15), and it is a major part of our Scriptures.

2. The Old Testament substantially influences our understanding of key biblical teachings.

By the end of the Law (Genesis–Deuteronomy), the Bible has already described or alluded to all five of the major covenants that guide Scripture’s plot structure (Adamic-Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and new). The rest of the Old Testament then builds on this portrait in detail. Accordingly, the Old Testament narrative builds anticipation for a better king, a blessed people, and a broader land. The Old Testament creates the problem and includes promises that the New Testament answers and fulfills. We need the Old Testament to fully understand God’s work in history.

Furthermore, some doctrines of Scripture are best understood only from the Old Testament. For example, is there a more worldview-shaping text than Genesis 1:1–2:3? Where else can we go other than the Old Testament to rightly understand sacred space and the temple? Is there a more explicit declaration of YHWH’s incomparability than Isaiah 40,⁹ or a more succinct expression of substitutionary atonement than Isaiah 53? Where should we go to know what Paul means by “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16)? All of these are principally derived from our understanding of the Old Testament.

9. YHWH, sometimes rendered with vowels as *Yahweh*, is the personal name by which the one true God identified himself and that the seers, sages, and songwriters employed in worship and preaching. YHWH is both the Creator of all things and Israel’s covenant Lord. Most modern translations represent the name through large and small capitals: LORD. The name is related to the verb of being and likely means “he causes to be”; that is, the Lord alone is the only uncaused being from whom, through whom, and to whom are all things.

Finally, the New Testament worldview and teachings are built on the framework supplied in the Old Testament. In the New Testament we find literally hundreds of Old Testament quotations, allusions, and echoes, none of which we will fully grasp apart from saturating ourselves in Jesus' Bible.

3. We meet the same God in both Testaments.

Note how the book of Hebrews begins: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1–2). The very God who spoke through the Old Testament prophets speaks through Jesus!

Now, you may ask, "But isn't the Old Testament's God one of wrath and burden, whereas the God of the New Testament is about grace and freedom?" Let's consider some texts, first from the Old Testament and then from the New.

Perhaps the most foundational Old Testament statement of YHWH's character and action is Exodus 34:6: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." The Old Testament then reasserts this truth numerous times in order to clarify why it is that God continued to pardon and preserve a wayward people: "But the LORD was gracious to them and had compassion on them, and he turned toward them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them, nor has he cast them from his presence until now" (2 Kings 13:23). "For if you return to the LORD, your brothers and your children will find compassion with their captors and return to this land. For the LORD your God is gracious and merciful and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him" (2 Chron. 30:9). "Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God" (Neh. 9:30–31). Thus God's grace fills the Old Testament, just as it does the New.

Furthermore, in the New Testament, Jesus speaks about hell more than anyone else. He declares, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). Similarly, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (18:6). Paul, quoting Deuteronomy 32:35, asserted, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (Rom. 12:19). And the author of Hebrews said, "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries" (Heb. 10:26–27). Thus God is just as wrathful in the New Testament as he is in the Old.

Certainly there are numerous expressions of YHWH's righteous anger in the Old Testament, just as there are massive manifestations of blood-bought mercy in the

New Testament. What is important is to recognize that *we meet the same God in the Old Testament as we do in the New*. In the whole Bible we meet a God who is faithful to his promises both to bless and to curse. He takes both sin and repentance seriously, and so should we!

4. The Old Testament announces the very “good news/gospel” we enjoy.

The gospel is this—that the reigning God saves and satisfies believing sinners through Christ Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. The gospel is this—that the reigning God saves and satisfies believing sinners through Christ Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Paul states that “the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached *the gospel* beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’” (Gal. 3:8). Abraham was already aware of the message of global salvation that we now enjoy. Similarly, in the opening of Romans, Paul stresses that the Lord “promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures” (i.e., the Old Testament Prophets) the very powerful “gospel of God . . . concerning his Son” that the apostle preached and in which we now rest (Rom. 1:1–3, 16). Key among these prophets was Isaiah, who anticipated the day when YHWH’s royal servant (the Messiah) and the many servants identified with him would herald comforting “good news” to the poor and broken—news that the saving God reigns through his anointed royal deliverer (Isa. 61:1; cf. 40:9–11; 52:7–10; Luke 4:16–21). Reading the Old Testament, therefore, is one of God’s given ways for us to better grasp and delight in the gospel (see also Heb. 4:2).

5. Both the old and new covenants call for love, and we can learn much about love from the Old Testament.

Within the old covenant, love was *what* the Lord called Israel to do (Deut. 6:5; 10:19); all the other commandments simply clarified *how* to do it. This was part of Jesus’ point when he stressed that all the Old Testament hangs on the call to love God and neighbor: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:37–40). Christ emphasized, “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (7:12). Similarly, Paul noted, “The whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:14; cf. Rom. 13:8, 10). As with old covenant Israel, the Lord calls Christians to lives characterized by love. But he now gives *all* members of the new covenant the ability to do what he commands. As Moses himself asserted, the very reason why God promised to circumcise hearts in the new covenant age was “so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 30:6). Moses also said that those enjoying this divine work in this future day would “obey the voice of the LORD and keep all his commandments that I command you today” (30:8). Moses’ old covenant law called for life-encompassing love, and Christians today, looking through the lens of Christ, can gain clarity from the Old Testament on the wide-ranging impact of love in all of life.

6. Jesus came not to destroy the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them.

Far from setting aside the Old Testament, Jesus stressed that he had come to fulfill it, and in the process he highlighted the lasting relevance of the Old Testament's teaching for Christians: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:17–19). In chapters 10 and 12 we'll further consider the significance of this text, but what is important to note here is that while the age of the old covenant has come to an end (Rom. 6:14–15; 1 Cor. 9:20–21; Gal. 5:18; cf. Luke 16:16), the Old Testament itself maintains lasting relevance for us in the way it displays the character of God (e.g., Rom. 7:12), points to the excellencies of Christ, and portrays for us the scope of love in all its facets (Matt. 22:37–40).

7. Jesus said that all the Old Testament points to him.

After his first encounter with Jesus, Philip announced to Nathanael, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophet wrote" (John 1:45). Do you want to see and savor Jesus as much as you can? We find him in the Old Testament. As Jesus himself said, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me" (John 5:39; cf. 5:46–47). "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). After his resurrection, proclaiming the gospel of God's kingdom (Acts 1:3), Jesus opened the minds of his disciples "to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem'" (Luke 24:45–47). A proper "understanding" of the Old Testament will lead one to hear in it a message of the Messiah and the mission that his life would generate. Similarly, Paul taught "nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles" (Acts 26:22–23). As an Old Testament preacher, Paul could declare, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). If you want to know Jesus more fully, read the Old Testament!

8. Failing to declare "the whole counsel of God" can put us in danger before the Lord.

Paul was a herald of the good news of God's kingdom in Christ (e.g., Acts 19:8; 20:25; 28:30–31), which he preached from the law of Moses and the Prophets—the Old Testament (28:23; cf. 26:22–23). In Acts 20:26–27 he testified to the Ephesian elders, "I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." The "*whole counsel of God*" refers to the entirety of God's purposes

in salvation history as revealed in Scripture. Had the apostle failed to make known the Lord's redemptive plan of blessing overcoming curse in the person of Jesus, he would have stood accountable before God for any future doctrinal or moral error that the Ephesian church carried out (cf. Ezek. 33:1–6; Acts 18:6). With the New Testament, Scripture is complete, and we now have in whole “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). This “faith,” however, is rightly understood only within the framework of “the whole counsel of God.” So may we be people who guard ourselves from bloodguilt by making much of the Old Testament in relation to Christ.

9. The New Testament authors stressed that God gave the Old Testament for Christians.

Paul was convinced that the divinely inspired Old Testament authors wrote *for* New Testament believers, living on this side of the death and resurrection of Christ: “For whatever was written in former days was written *for our instruction*, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4; cf. 4:23–24). “Now these things happened to [the Israelites] as an example, but they were written down *for our instruction*, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11).¹⁰ Accordingly, the apostle emphasized to Timothy, who had been raised on the Old Testament by his Jewish mother and grandmother (Acts 16:1; 2 Tim. 1:5), that the “*sacred writings*” of his upbringing “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). People today can get saved from God's wrath and from the enslavement of sin by reading the Old Testament through the lens of Christ!

This is why Paul says in the very next verse, “All Scripture is . . . profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (3:16–17). New covenant believers can correct and reprove straying brothers and sisters *from the Old Testament* when read in relation to Christ, for in it we find many “profitable” things (Acts 20:20)—a “gospel of the grace of God” (20:24)—that call for “repentance toward God” and “faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (20:21). Based on this fact, New Testament authors regularly used the Old Testament as the basis for Christian exhortation, assuming its relevance for Christians (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:8–12; Eph. 6:2–3; 1 Tim. 5:18; 1 Peter 1:14–16). Because we are now part of the new covenant and not the old, natural questions arise regarding how exactly the Christian should relate to specific old covenant instruction. We will address these matters in chapter 12. Nevertheless, the point stands that the Old Testament, while not written *to* Christians, was still written *for* us.

10. Paul commands church leaders to preach the Old Testament.

The last of my ten reasons why the Old Testament still matters for Christians builds on the fact that Paul was referring to the Old Testament when he spoke of the “*sacred writings*” that are able to make a person “wise for salvation” and the “*Scripture*” that is

10. In chapter 12 under the section “God Gave the Old Testament to Instruct Christians,” we'll see that the Old Testament prophets themselves anticipated that this would be the case.

“breathed out by God and profitable” (2 Tim. 3:15–16). Knowing this colors our understanding of his following charge to Timothy: “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passion, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (4:2–4). For the apostle, Christian preachers such as Timothy needed to preach the Old Testament in order to guard the church from apostasy. While we now have the New Testament, we can, and indeed must, appropriate the Old Testament as Jesus and his apostles did for the good of God’s church.

The Benefits of Hebrew Exegesis



You do not have to know Hebrew to profit much from this book. Indeed, every chapter contains solid information for guiding English-only Old Testament interpretation. Nevertheless, God gave us most of the Old Testament in Hebrew, and because of this a lot of material in the first half of the book (chaps. 2–7) clarifies the process of *Hebrew* exegesis. If you do not know Hebrew, I encourage you to keep reading this section, for I believe that it can move you to appreciate and pray for those who do. If you are not interested in hearing some of the benefits of Hebrew exegesis, feel free to jump ahead to the next section.

For most of my academic ministry career, the priest-scribe Ezra’s approach to Scripture has highly influenced my biblical interpretation. “The good hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had set his heart to *study* the Law of the LORD, and to *do* it and to *teach* his statutes and rules in Israel” (Ezra 7:9–10).



God’s Word: This was the order of Ezra’s resolve. Study shaped by careful observation, right understanding, and fair evaluation is to give rise to practice—feeling appropriately about the truth that is seen and then acting accordingly. Only after we have studied and practiced are we ready to teach. If we teach without having studied, we replace God’s words with our own; we become the authority instead of the Lord. If we teach without having practiced, we are nothing more than hypocrites. I want to consider why we need men and women in every generation who can approach the Old Testament using biblical Hebrew, and I want to consider the answer in light of Ezra’s resolve.¹¹

11. For more pastoral reflection on Ezra 7:10, see Jason S. DeRouchie, “A Life Centered on Torah (Ezra 7:10),” in *Basics of Biblical Hebrew: Grammar*, by Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 249–50.

While every believer must seek to know God, not everyone needs to know the biblical languages. Indeed, the Lord has graciously made his Word translatable so that those “from every tribe and language and people and nation” may hear of and believe in the Savior (Rev. 5:9; cf. Neh. 8:7–8; Acts 2:6). With this, grasping the fundamentals of Hebrew and Greek neither ensures correct interpretation of Scripture nor removes all interpretive challenges. It does not automatically make one a good exegete of texts or an articulate, winsome proclaimer of God’s truth. Linguistic skill also does not necessarily result in deeper levels of holiness or in greater knowledge of God. Without question, *the most important skill for interpreting Scripture* is to read, read, and read the biblical text carefully and God-dependently and to consider what it says about God’s character, actions, and purposes and how it points to Christ.

Nevertheless, we need some in the church in every generation who can skillfully use the biblical languages. Why? I have four reasons.¹² As I give an overview of these, if you don’t know Hebrew (yet), keep in mind what I say in the previous paragraph and let any inkling of discouragement turn into gratefulness to God for raising up some who can study, practice, and teach from this framework.

1. The biblical languages give us direct access to God’s written Word.

Original-language exegesis exalts Jesus by affirming God’s decision to give us his Word in a Book, written first in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. In his wisdom and for the benefit of every generation of humankind, God chose to preserve and guard in a Book his authoritative, clear, necessary, and sufficient Word. Jesus highlights the significance of this fact when he declares that he prophetically fulfills all Old Testament hopes: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:17–18). The very details of the biblical text (every iota and every dot) bear lasting significance and point to the person and work of Christ. So we align ourselves with God’s wisdom and participate in his passion to exalt his Son when we take the biblical languages seriously in the study of his Book. This is the first reason why we do *Hebrew* exegesis.

2. The biblical languages help us study God’s Word.

Using Hebrew and Greek can give us greater certainty that we have grasped the meaning of God’s Book. Knowing the biblical languages can also help us observe more accurately, understand more clearly, evaluate more fairly, and interpret more confidently the inspired details of the biblical text. Without Hebrew and Greek, ministers are:

- Required to trust someone else’s translation (many of which are excellent, but which are translations/interpretations nonetheless);

12. What follows is a condensed version of the main points in Jason S. DeRouchie, “The Profit of Employing the Biblical Languages: Scriptural and Historical Reflections,” *Themelios* 37, 1 (2012): 32–50.

- Left without help when translations differ;
- Forced to rely heavily on what others say in commentaries and other tools without accurate comprehension or fair evaluation; and
- Compelled to miss numerous discourse features that are not easily conveyed through translation.

Knowing the languages neither makes an interpreter always right nor sets all interpretive challenges aside. Nevertheless, by using the biblical languages we remove hindrances to understanding and take away many occasions for mistakes. Furthermore, knowing Hebrew and Greek enables interpreters to more accurately track an author's flow of thought through which the Bible's message is revealed.

3. The biblical languages help us practice God's Word.

Employing Hebrew and Greek can assist in developing Christian maturity that validates our witness in the world. Scripture is clear that a true encounter with God's Word will alter the way we live, shaping servants instead of kings and nurturing Christ-exalting humility rather than pride. Sadly, practicing the Word is too often forgotten, thus hindering the spread of the gospel in the world.

Now, because our knowing the Lord and living for him develops only in the context of the Word and because Bible study is best done through the original languages, Hebrew and Greek can serve as God's instruments to develop holiness, which enhances the church's mission. Original-language exegesis can help clarify what feelings the Lord wants us to have and what actions he wants us to take. And along with opening fresh doors of discovery into the biblical text, the arduous task of learning, keeping, and using the languages itself provides many opportunities for growth in character, discipline, boldness, and joy. Hypocrisy hinders kingdom expansion, but biblically grounded study accompanied by a virtuous life substantiates the gospel and promotes mission, leading to worship.

4. The biblical languages help us teach God's Word.

Original-language exegesis fuels a fresh and bold expression and defense of the truth in preaching and teaching. Saturated study of Scripture through Hebrew and Greek provides a sustained opportunity for personal discovery, freshness, and insight, all of which can enhance our teaching. Moreover, the languages provide a powerful means for judging and defending biblical truth. The church needs earnest contenders for the faith, those who are "able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9). The biblical languages sharpen our teaching and preaching to make it as pointed, accurate, and penetrating as possible.

In summary, for the Christian minister who is charged to proclaim God's truth with accuracy and to preserve the gospel's purity with integrity, the biblical languages help in one's study, practice, and teaching of the Word. Properly using the languages opens doors of biblical discovery that would otherwise remain locked and provides

interpreters with accountability that they would otherwise not have. Ministers who know Hebrew and Greek not only can feed themselves but will also be able to gain a level of biblical discernment that will allow them to respond in an informed way to new translations, new theological perspectives, and other changing trends in church and culture.

In light of the above, I offer the following action steps to readers of all vocational callings:

- ***Seminary professors and administrators.*** Fight to make exegeting the Word in the original languages the core of every curriculum that is designed to train vocational ministers of God's Book.
- ***Church shepherds and shepherds-in-training.*** Seek to become God-dependent, rigorous thinkers who study, practice, and teach the Word—in that order!
- ***Other congregational leaders.*** Give your ministers who are called to preach and teach time to study, and help your congregations see this as a priority.
- ***Young-adult leaders and college professors.*** Encourage those sensing a call to vocational ministry of God's Word to become thoroughly equipped for the task.
- ***Everyone.*** Seek as much as possible to be a first-handers when interpreting God's Word, guard yourself from false teaching, hold your leaders accountable, and pray to our glorious God for the preservation of the gospel, for our leaders, and for the churches and schools training them.

Now let's discover how to understand and apply the Old Testament.

Overview of the Interpretive Process: TOCMA



This book employs a twelve-step process to guide the move from exegesis to theology and from personal study to practice and then instruction. While this guidebook considers each stage independently, the interpretive process is more like a spiral by which we continually revisit various interpretive stopping points in our up-road climb to biblical faithfulness.

For the sake of easy recollection, I have tagged the whole process *TOCMA*, which stands for *Text, Observation, Context, Meaning, Application*. Each of the twelve stages falls within one of these overarching categories.

Part 1: TEXT—“What is the makeup of the passage?”

1. **Genre:** Determine the literary form, subject matter, and function of the passage, compare it to similar genres, and consider the implications for interpretation.
2. **Literary units and text hierarchy:** Determine the limits and basic structure of the passage.
3. **Text criticism:** Establish the passage’s original wording.
4. **Translation:** Translate the text and compare other translations.

Part 2: OBSERVATION—“How is the passage communicated?”

5. **Clause and text grammar:** Assess the makeup and relationship of words, phrases, clauses, and larger text units.
6. **Argument-tracing:** Finish tracing the literary argument and create a message-driven outline that is tied to the passage’s main point.
7. **Word and concept studies:** Clarify the meaning of key words, phrases, and concepts.

Part 3: CONTEXT—“Where does the passage fit?”

8. **Historical context:** Understand the historical situation from which the author composed the text and identify any historical details that the author mentions or assumes.
9. **Literary context:** Comprehend the role that the passage plays in the whole book.

Part 4: MEANING—“What does the passage mean?”

10. **Biblical theology:** Consider how your passage connects to the Bible’s overall flow and message and points to Christ.
11. **Systematic theology:** Discern how your passage theologically coheres with the whole Bible, assessing key doctrines especially in direct relation to the gospel.

Part 5: APPLICATION—“Why does the passage matter?”

12. **Practical theology:** Apply the text to yourself, the church, and the world, stressing the centrality of Christ and the hope of the gospel.

Come with me now on a journey of discovery and skill development. Chapters 1–9 focus especially on the process of exegesis, whereas chapters 10–12 address theology. God-honoring worship is both the fuel and the goal of every stage of biblical interpretation. So may your study result in practice and overflow in teaching that is filled with praise and proclamation—all for the glory of Christ and the good of his church among the nations.

Key Words and Concepts

Biblical interpretation

Exegesis

Theology

Special revelation

Infallible and inerrant

IOUS

Whole counsel of God

Study → do → teach!

TOCMA

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Describe the connection between exegesis and theology. What is the danger of doing theology apart from exegesis or exegesis apart from theology?
2. What are DeRouchie's four presuppositions that guide his study of the Bible?
3. What is the risk if you do not hold each of these presuppositions?
4. What is the ultimate goal of biblical interpretation?
5. Which of the ten reasons why the Old Testament is important for Christians most moved your soul? Which one most compels you to study the Old Testament?
6. In what ways does knowing Hebrew benefit and not benefit the process of biblical exegesis?

Resources for Further Study¹³

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13. In each chapter, I have included "Resources for Further Study" that I believe will serve the student of Scripture in various ways. Not all the books listed are unified in their theological perspectives or interpretive approaches, so the reader needs to carefully evaluate all claims up against the Bible, which supplies the highest authority for the Christian. I have preceded with a star those resources that I believe to be the most important or best. A plain black star (★) marks resources that are intended for all readers, whereas a white star within a black circle (⊛) highlights those that are designed for more advanced readers and that may also contain Hebrew. I thank my friend and colleague Andy Naselli for his help in shaping these bibliographies.

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HOW TO
UNDERSTAND AND APPLY
THE NEW TESTAMENT



TWELVE STEPS FROM EXEGESIS TO THEOLOGY

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PREFACE



I LOVE GOD, and I love studying his Word and his world. I wrote this book to help you study the New Testament, specifically how to do exegesis and theology.

Whom is this book for?

- *Students.* This book could be a textbook for a college or seminary course on interpreting the Bible. (My school uses it for a course that our seminary students take during their first semester.)
- *Pastors and people with theological training.* This book could refresh and enhance how you understand and apply the New Testament.
- *Thoughtful men and women who have little or no formal theological training.* This book is also for thoughtful Christian laypeople. As I drafted this book, I requested feedback from some men and women who don't have any formal theological training. I incorporated many of their suggestions because I want this book to serve everyone who is eager to understand and apply the Bible. A few parts of the book may be challenging for you if you do not have a lot of theological education, but if you are convinced that it is worth the effort (and it is!), then you can rise to meet that challenge.

The book's structure is simple. It begins by introducing exegesis and theology, which I break down into twelve steps. Those twelve steps are the book's twelve chapters.

I drafted this book in summer 2015 as I prepared to record a course called "New Testament Exegesis" for Logos Mobile Ed in a studio at the Faithlife headquarters in Bellingham, Washington. At the end of that process, John J. Hughes from P&R Publishing casually asked me whether I had any book ideas in mind, and it occurred to me that I could serve the church by taking the course notes I had drafted for a teleprompter and revising them as a book. This book maintains the informal tone and personal anecdotes from those lectures.

As we study how to understand and apply the New Testament, let's follow Johann Albrecht Bengel's advice: "Apply yourself wholly to the text; apply the text wholly to yourself."

INTRODUCTION



What Is Exegesis?

One of the few framed items in my school office features the words of Ezra 7:10: “For Ezra had set his heart [1] to study the Law of the LORD, and [2] to do it and [3] to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” The pattern has three steps:

1. *Study* the Word.
2. *Practice* or *do* the Word.
3. *Teach* the Word.

Before you teach the Word to others, you need to practice it. You must practice what you teach and preach. But before you practice and teach the Word, you have to know what it says. So you must study it. That’s what this book is about: How should you study the Word so that you can practice and teach it? More specifically, how should you understand and apply the New Testament?

New Testament refers to the second part of the Christian Bible, the twenty-seven books that are the counterpart of the Old Testament. In order to understand the New Testament, you must exegete it. But what does *exegesis* mean?

I remember the first time I heard someone use that word. My face twisted up in puzzlement, and I thought, “*Exe-Jesus?! Did he just take the name of Jesus in vain?*” But I soon learned that *exegesis* is the opposite of *eisegesis*. *Exegesis* draws the meaning *out* of a text (that’s good!), and *eisegesis* reads a meaning *into* a text (that’s bad!). In other words, *exegesis* interprets a text by analyzing what the author intended to communicate. *Exegesis* is simply *careful reading*. For example, when a young lady who is deeply in love with her fiancé receives a letter from him, she reads it carefully. She wants to understand what her fiancé meant.

Exegeting the New Testament includes but is not limited to parsing Greek words, doing word studies, and analyzing syntax at various levels (i.e., clause, sentence, discourse, genre) while being sensitive to literary features and the running argument. *The text means what the text’s author meant*. Exegetes are primarily concerned with interpreting a text, that is, discovering what the author meant. And when the text is the

Bible, we must never stop with exegesis: we must also do theology—biblical, historical, systematic, and practical theology. We must *apply* what the text means in our contexts.

This may raise a couple of questions:

- What's the difference between *exegesis* and *hermeneutics*? Herman who?! *Hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics concerns *principles* of interpretation (i.e., it's about how the interpretive process works), and *exegesis applies* those principles. Hermeneutics supplies the tools to discover a text's meaning, and exegesis uses those tools.
- Where does expository preaching fit into this process? Expository preaching communicates not only what a text means but how it applies to people in their contexts. Expository preaching is sermons that build on sound exegesis. That is, the sermons explain and apply the Bible based on sound exegesis. In general, this means that the main point of the biblical text from which a preacher is preaching should be the main point of the sermon.¹ So hermeneutics is to exegesis what homiletics is to preaching. Homiletics concerns *principles* of preaching (i.e., preparing, structuring, and delivering sermons), while exposition *applies* those principles (e.g., preaching a sermon on Romans 3:21–26).

For example, you can study how to make pizza, but that is different from applying that knowledge while you make pizza. Or you can study rules and strategies for playing soccer, but that is different from applying that knowledge while you play soccer. Similarly, homiletics studies how to preach, which is different from applying those principles while you preach. And hermeneutics studies how to interpret the Bible, which is different from applying those principles while you interpret or exegete the Bible (i.e., carefully read it by drawing meaning out of it, analyzing what the author intended to communicate).

Exegesis may sound complicated, but it's really not. You know how to exegete a text. If I randomly opened an e-mail thread in my Gmail inbox and if I asked you to exegete it, what would you do? You would probably do the following (though not necessarily in this order):

1. Recognize that the style of literature is e-mail, so the thread consists of messages that two or more individuals electronically wrote to each other.
2. Look at the subject line to see whether it tells you what the thread is about.
3. Look at the names of the authors in the thread.
4. Look at the time stamps of the e-mails.
5. Figure out who the authors are.
6. Read the messages in the order in which people sent them.

1. Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert, *Preach: Theology Meets Practice*, 9Marks (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2012), 36–38.

If you were to *eisegete* an e-mail thread, you would read your own meaning into it. You might select a word or phrase or sentence from an e-mail that strikes you and then invest it with a meaning totally foreign to what the authors in the thread meant. You may unintentionally *eisegete* it because you do not sufficiently understand the language or historical context.

When people interpret the Bible, even though they may have the best motives in the world, they can still read their ideas into the Bible rather than draw out what the author originally intended. Throughout this book, you can examine many specific New Testament texts that people *eisegete* rather than *exegete*, and you can learn how to responsibly *exegete*.

Twelve Steps for Exegesis and Theology

In this book I'm breaking down the process of doing exegesis and theology into twelve steps. These twelve steps are the book's twelve chapters:

1. *Genre*. Establish guidelines for interpreting a passage's style of literature.
2. *Textual Criticism*. Establish the original wording.
3. *Translation*. Compare translations.*
4. *Greek Grammar*. Understand how sentences communicate by words, phrases, and clauses.*
5. *Argument Diagram*. Trace the logical argument by arcing, bracketing, or phrasing.*
6. *Historical-Cultural Context*. Understand the situation in which the author composed the literature and any historical-cultural details that the author mentions or probably assumes.
7. *Literary Context*. Understand the role that a passage plays in its whole book.
8. *Word Studies*. Unpack key words, phrases, and concepts.
9. *Biblical Theology*. Study how the whole Bible progresses, integrates, and climaxes in Christ.
10. *Historical Theology*. Survey and evaluate how significant exegetes and theologians have understood the Bible and theology.
11. *Systematic Theology*. Discern how a passage theologically coheres with the whole Bible.
12. *Practical Theology*. Apply the text to yourself, the church, and the world.

* I plan to use New Testament Greek throughout the book, especially in steps 3–5. If you don't know Greek at all, this book is still for you. I am not assuming that you know intermediate Greek grammar and syntax, though it will certainly help if you know at least a little bit of Greek, such as basic forms and vocabulary. But those who don't know Greek can easily follow the vast majority of this book.

Steps?

It's somewhat artificial to break down exegesis and theology into twelve steps because in practice I don't know of any New Testament scholars who think, "OK: Step 1: do this. Step 2: do that," and so on.

It's like asking Lionel Messi how he plays soccer. He doesn't think, "Well, step 1 is that I dribble. Step 2 is that I run and dribble at the same time." There are so many facets to playing soccer at a high level. That's why soccer players can improve their overall game by focusing on individual areas such as dribbling and passing and sprinting and cutting and shooting and lifting weights to get stronger and studying strategies to win. But in the heat of the moment during a game, soccer players aren't thinking, "Step 1: do this. Step 2: do that." At that point they're just playing by instinct and employing all the skills they've developed as best they can. They go with the flow of the game and adjust to their opponents' defensive schemes and strategize how to improve on both ends of the field. But they're not following a clear twelve-step list.

So it is with exegesis and theology: When a world-class scholar exegetes a passage, he is not thinking, "Step 1: do this. Step 2: do that." After decades of exegeting the Bible, he has found that the exegetical process has become more intuitive and integrative for him.

But I'm not assuming that you're a scholar. So as we study New Testament exegesis, we'll break it down into logical steps so that we can analyze the whole process piece by piece and see how it works. Focusing on these steps one at a time is like a soccer player's focusing on aspects of soccer one at a time: dribbling, passing, shooting, and the like.

So these twelve steps are "steps" only in theory. They are interrelated. And you won't necessarily need to spend time on each step for every passage you exegete or even deliberately proceed from one step to the next, checking off items on a list as you go. But presenting twelve steps like this helps us focus on various aspects of exegesis as we attempt to understand the process better.

Exegesis Is Both a Science and an Art

I don't want to imply that exegesis is a mechanical, robotic process, that if you simply follow the instructions you will inevitably churn out the right interpretations. No, exegesis is both a science and an art because it involves weighing factors, not just counting them. It's complicated. And that's why it's important for you to posture your heart correctly before you even begin. Approach the exegetical process humbly and prayerfully. Ask God to open your eyes. You need the Holy Spirit to illumine your mind.

John Piper, chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary, defines education as instilling habits of mind and heart that incline and enable students for the rest of their lives to do six actions for the glory of God and the good of the world:

1. Observe the Word and the world carefully.
2. Understand what you observe clearly.
3. Evaluate what you have understood fairly.

4. Feel that evaluation proportionately.
5. Apply your discoveries to all of life wisely.
6. Express your discoveries clearly and accurately and creatively and winsomely.²

That's a daunting task for which you need God's help. So you may want to pray something like this as you exegete God's Word: "Father, this is the one to whom you will look: the one who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at your Word (Isa. 66:2). Please give me grace to be humble and contrite in spirit and to tremble at your Word."

How Do Exegesis and Theology Interrelate?³

Five Theological Disciplines

There are five theological disciplines:⁴

1. *Exegesis* interprets a text by analyzing what the author intended to communicate. It draws the meaning out of a text. The first eight steps in this book are components of exegesis: genre, textual criticism, translation, Greek grammar, argument diagram, historical-cultural context, literary context, and word studies.

2. *Biblical theology* studies how the whole Bible progresses, integrates, and climaxes in Christ. It makes organic, salvation-historical connections with the whole canon on its own terms, especially regarding how the Old and New Testaments integrate and climax in Christ. It focuses on the turning points in the Bible's story line, and its most pivotal concern is how the New Testament uses the Old. Old and New Testament theology are subsets of whole-Bible biblical theology. We must read the whole Bible—including the Old Testament—with *Christian eyes*.

3. *Historical theology* surveys and evaluates how significant exegetes and theologians have understood the Bible and theology. How has Christian doctrine developed? In particular, how has it responded to false teaching? This focuses on periods of time earlier than our own.

4. *Systematic theology* discerns how a passage theologically coheres with the whole Bible. This builds on but goes beyond exegesis. It answers the question "What does the whole Bible say about _____ [fill in the blank]?" It presupposes that the whole Bible is coherent, that it doesn't contradict itself.

5. *Practical theology* applies the text to yourself, the church, and the world. It answers the question, "How should we then live?"⁵

2. See John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 181–98.

3. This section condenses Andrew David Naselli, "D. A. Carson's Theological Method," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 29, 2 (2011): 245–74.

4. These are the five major categories I use to organize my library. See "Appendix A: Why You Should Organize Your Personal Theological Library and a Way How."

5. This question borrows the title of a well-known book: Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*, in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, 5 vols. (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1985), 5:79–277.

Describing each of those final four final theological disciplines with a single adjective—*biblical*, *historical*, *systematic*, and *practical*—can be confusing because those adjectives also describe the other disciplines. Biblical theology, for example, is not *ahistorical*, *unsystematic*, and *impractical*! And systematic theology should be *biblical*. Those terms are simply traditional labels for interrelated theological disciplines.

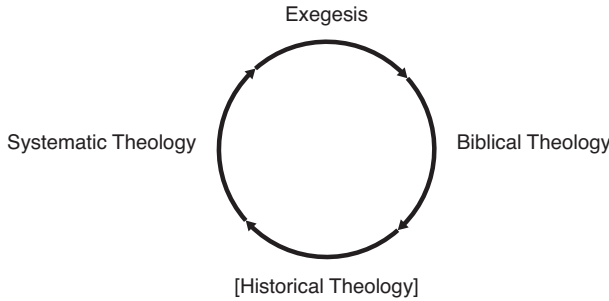
The Complex Interrelationship between the Five Theological Disciplines

D. A. Carson explains:

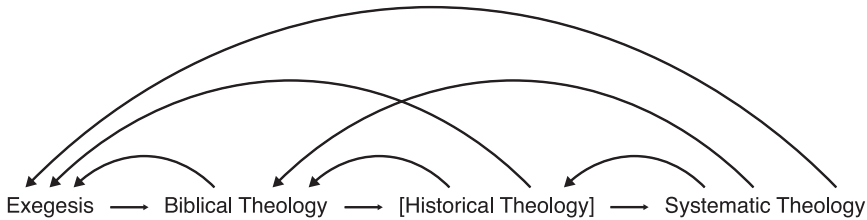
It would be convenient if we could operate exclusively along the direction of the following diagram:

Exegesis → Biblical Theology → [Historical Theology] → Systematic Theology

(The brackets around the third element are meant to suggest that in this paradigm historical theology makes a direct contribution to the development from biblical theology to systematic theology but is not itself a part of that line.) In fact, this paradigm, though neat, is naïve. No exegesis is ever done in a vacuum. If every theist is in some sense a systematician, then he is a systematician *before* he begins his exegesis. Are we, then, locked into a hermeneutical circle, like the following?



No; there is a better way. It might be diagrammed like this:



That is to say, there are feedback lines (and more lines going forward, for that matter). It is absurd to deny that one’s systematic theology does not affect one’s exegesis. Nevertheless the line of final control is the straight one from exegesis right through biblical and historical theology to systematic theology. The final

authority is the Scriptures, and the Scriptures alone. For this reason exegesis, though affected by systematic theology, is not to be shackled by it.⁶

Now let's briefly think through how the theological disciplines interrelate, how they influence one another. Consider seven relationships:

1. *Exegesis and Biblical Theology*. These are the two most similar theological disciplines. In general, exegesis analyzes, and biblical theology synthesizes. Exegesis helps you read the Bible's story line with precision, and biblical theology helps you exegete with the Bible's story line in view.

2. *Exegesis and Historical Theology*. Creeds and theologians are not ultimately authoritative; only Scripture is. But many Bible interpreters move straight from exegesis to systematic theology without pausing to consider historic creeds and significant theologians. Historical theology reveals orthodox exegetical options and shows how many contemporary views are not as novel as they may seem.

3. *Exegesis and Systematic Theology*. You might think that you exegete the Bible neutrally and objectively and that you build your systematic theology on such discoveries. But that's not how it works: your systematic theology profoundly influences your exegesis. One danger here is that you can develop your own "canon within the canon"—your own list of favorite passages that you think are most important and that operate like a controlling interpretive grid—so that your systematic theology controls your exegesis. (And sometimes your systematic theology may simply be your church tradition.) This helps explain how, for example, some covenant theologians and dispensationalists can exegete the same texts with such different results.⁷ Or sometimes you might overemphasize one biblical truth at the expense of another.

4. *Historical Theology and Systematic Theology*. When studying what the Bible teaches about a particular subject (i.e., when you are doing systematic theology), you must integrate historical theology. Systematic theology uses categories from historical theology, but what often drives systematic theology is what you think are the most important current issues to address.

5. *Biblical Theology and Historical Theology*. Since we are finite, we do biblical theology best when we interact with historical theology. How have other significant exegetes and theologians done biblical theology?

6. *Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology*. Biblical theology is inductive, historical, and organic; systematic theology is relatively deductive, ahistorical, and universal. For biblical theology, the text sets the agenda. For systematic theology, the text is important, but other factors often set the agenda—such as a philosophical question. Here's how Carson puts it:

6. D. A. Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 91–92.

7. See Stephen J. Wellum, "Covenants in Biblical-Theological Systems: Dispensational and Covenant Theology," in Stephen J. Wellum and Peter J. Gentry, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 39–80.

Systematic theology tends to be a little further removed from the biblical text than does biblical theology, but a little closer to cultural engagement. Biblical theology tends to seek out the rationality and communicative genius of each literary genre; systematic theology tends to integrate the diverse rationalities in its pursuit of a large-scale, worldview-forming synthesis. In this sense, systematic theology tends to be a culminating discipline; biblical theology, though it is a worthy end in itself, tends to be a bridge discipline.⁸

7. *Practical Theology and the Other Theological Disciplines.* Practical theology applies (i.e., culturally contextualizes) exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, and systematic theology to help people glorify God by living wisely with a biblical worldview. It includes pastoral theology, preaching, counseling, evangelism, ethics, education, culture, worship, and much more. It answers such questions as “How should people respond to God’s revelation?” You simply can’t do responsible practical theology unless its foundation is exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, and systematic theology.

If you emphasize “what the Bible means *to me*,” you might completely ignore the distance between yourself and the text. But if you read more responsibly, you will read a passage of the Bible on its own terms, discern how it contributes to the whole Bible, and ask how that applies to yourself, the church, and society.

Doing exegesis and theology well is a lot of work. Where does prayer fit in?

Which Is More Valuable: Ten Minutes of Prayer or Ten Hours of Study?

God did not reveal the Bible merely to satisfy our curiosity about intellectual questions. He reveals himself and his ways in order to transform how we live. So on the one hand, we don’t want to superficially exegete the Bible and then irresponsibly and prematurely apply it. But on the other hand, we don’t want to rigorously exegete the Bible and stop there.

Some people perceive a massive tension between (1) rigorously exegeting the text and (2) cultivating a prayerful devotional life. But do you have to choose between being academic and being devotional?

Enter B. B. Warfield (1851–1921). He was a scholar—one of the best. And he refused to separate theology and spirituality. Warfield strikes an outstanding balance in five articles, reprinted in his *Selected Shorter Writings*. Here are the five titles in chronological order:⁹

1. “Authority, Intellect, Heart,” 2:668–71.
2. “The Indispensableness of Systematic Theology to the Preacher,” 2:280–88.

8. D. A. Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 103.

9. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970–1973).

3. “Spiritual Culture in the Theological Seminary,” 2:468–96.
4. “The Religious Life of Theological Students,” 1:411–25.
5. “The Purpose of the Seminary,” 1:374–78.

Those five articles by B. B. Warfield are hugely helpful and motivating. So here is a little taste of Warfield.

Warfield argues that pitting doctrine against devotion is a false dichotomy because God intends them to go together. They are not mutually exclusive; one without the other is incomplete. Here’s a sample from his essay “The Religious Life of Theological Students”:

The ministry is a “learned profession”; and the man without learning, no matter with what other gifts he may be endowed, is unfit for its duties. But learning, though indispensable, is not the most indispensable thing for a minister. “Apt to teach”—yes, the minister must be “apt to teach”; and observe that what I say—or rather what Paul says—is “apt to *teach*.” Not apt merely to exhort, to beseech, to appeal, to entreat; nor even merely, to testify, to bear witness; but to teach. And teaching implies knowledge: he who teaches must know. Paul, in other words, requires of you, as we are perhaps learning not very felicitously to phrase it, “instructional,” not merely “inspirational,” service. But aptness to teach alone does not make a minister; nor is it his primary qualification. It is only one of a long list of requirements which Paul lays down as necessary to meet in him who aspires to this high office. And all the rest concern, not his intellectual, but his spiritual fitness. A minister must be learned, on pain of being utterly incompetent for his work. But before and above being learned, a minister must be godly.

Nothing could be more fatal, however, than to set these two things over against one another. Recruiting officers do not dispute whether it is better for soldiers to have a right leg or a left leg: soldiers should have both legs. Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books. “What!” is the appropriate response, “than ten hours over your books, on your knees?” Why should you turn from God when you turn to your books, or feel that you must turn from your books in order to turn to God? If learning and devotion are as antagonistic as that, then the intellectual life is in itself accursed, and there can be no question of a religious life for a student, even of theology. . . . Just because you are students of theology, it is understood that you are religious men—especially religious men, to whom the cultivation of your religious life is a matter of the profoundest concern—of such concern that you will wish above all things to be warned of the dangers that may assail your religious life, and be pointed to the means by which you may strengthen and enlarge it. In your case there can be no “either-or” here—either a student or a man of God. You must be both.¹⁰

10. *Ibid.*, 1:411–12.

Here's one more taste, from Warfield's essay "Spiritual Culture in the Theological Seminary":

The entire work of the seminary deserves to be classed in the category of means of grace; and the whole routine of work done here may be made a very powerful means of grace if we will only prosecute it in a right spirit and with due regard to its religious value. . . .

I beseech you, brethren, take every item of your seminary work as a religious duty. I am emphasizing the adjective in this. I mean do all your work religiously—that is, with a religious end in view, in a religious spirit, and with the religious side of it dominant in your mind. Do not lose such an opportunity as this to enlighten, deepen, and strengthen your devotion. Let nothing pass by you without sucking the honey from it. If you learn a Hebrew word, let not the merely philological interest absorb your attention: remember that it is a word which occurs in God's Holy Book, recall the passages in which it stands, remind yourselves what great religious truths it has been given to have a part in recording for the saving health of men. . . . Apply every word to your own souls as you go on, and never rest satisfied until you feel as well as understand. . . . Treat, I beg you, the whole work of the seminary as a unique opportunity offered you to learn about God, or rather, to put it at the height of its significance, to learn God—to come to know him whom to know is life everlasting. If the work of the seminary shall be so prosecuted, it will prove itself to be the chief means of grace in all your lives. I have heard it said that some men love theology more than they love God. Do not let it be possible to say that of you. Love theology, of course: but love theology for no other reason than that it is THEOLOGY—the knowledge of God—and because it is your meat and drink to know God, to know him truly, and as far as it is given to mortals, to know him whole.¹¹

11. Ibid., 2:478–80. The section entitled "Warfield the Affectionate Theologian" at the end of this book is spot on: Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B. B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 567–70. Zaspel nails it when he describes Warfield as "a theologian of the heart" (568):

He will surrender neither doctrine nor experience. There is no genuinely Christian experience apart from truth, and it is this depth of Christian experience that characterizes Warfield throughout his writings. If he argues for an inerrant Bible, it is to find in it certain truth about the God whom we can trust. If he explores the mysteries of the Trinity, it is to deepen worship. If he argues for the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, he finds in it cause for praise and comfort and assurance. If he argues for a clear understanding of the two natures of Christ, it is to rest in a uniquely qualified Redeemer and to know and glory in the greatness of his condescending love; only an informed reflection on the redeeming grace of the incarnation "more ardently kindles the affection of faith." If he argues against Pelagian and Arminian and for Calvinistic views of humanity and salvation, it is to heighten our sense of dependence upon and appreciation for divine grace and thereby cultivate piety that is distinctly and thoroughly Christian. If he argues for justification by faith, it is because in no other place can the conscience find rest and be at peace with God and enjoy fellowship with him. When he reads the narrative of Jesus' trials, he highlights not simply the evil of humanity as displayed in Pilate, the priests, and the mob; rather, he adores the contrasting perfections of the One they condemn. For Warfield the academic study of Scripture is to be not only a means to minister to others but also "a religious exercise out of which you draw every day enlargement of heart, elevation of spirit, and adoring delight in

Academia didn't master Warfield; Warfield mastered academia.¹² He refused to separate what God has joined together. Serious theological study and spirituality go together.

Which is more important: an airplane's left wing or right wing? That's a bad question. And so is this one: Which is more valuable: ten minutes of prayer or ten hours of study? Answer: Ten hours of study *on your knees*.

Key Words and Concepts

Argument diagram
 Biblical theology
 Canon within the canon
 Eisegesis
 Exegesis
 Expository preaching
 Genre
 Greek grammar
 Hermeneutics
 Historical-cultural context
 Historical theology
 Homiletics
 Literary context
 Practical theology
 Systematic theology
 Textual criticism
 Translation
 Word studies

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Some preachers eisegete the Bible instead of exegeting it. How can you discern whether a preacher is explaining what the author intended to communicate?
2. Do you ever exegete your e-mail more carefully than you exegete the Bible? If so, why?
3. Of the twelve steps for exegesis and theology, which are you most and least passionate about? Why?
4. Regarding how exegesis and theology interrelate, do you think some of the five theological disciplines are more important than others? Why?

your Maker and your Savior." . . . He was, in his heart of hearts, a sinner rescued by divine grace, and it is this consideration that seems to have driven both his devotional life and his polemic endeavors. (569–70)

12. See Andrew David Naselli, "Three Reflections on Evangelical Academic Publishing," *Themelios* 39, 3 (2014): 428–54.

5. Do you ever feel a tension between carefully reading the Bible and cultivating a prayerful devotional life? What practical steps can you take so that you don't separate what God has joined together?

Resources for Further Study

- Adler, Mortimer J., and Charles Van Doren. *How to Read a Book*. 2nd ed. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972. A classic on how to read carefully. The authors do not have biblical exegesis in mind, but their principles apply to reading any book—including the books of the Bible.
- Black, David Alan, and David S. Dockery, eds. *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001. About 550 pages to reference. It includes chapters on most of the twelve steps that we address in this book.
- Blomberg, Craig L., with Jennifer Foutz Markley. *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010. One of the most helpful introductions to New Testament exegesis. It lays out the exegetical process in ten steps: (1) Textual Criticism, (2) Translation and Translations, (3) Historical-Cultural Context, (4) Literary Context, (5) Word Studies, (6) Grammar, (7) Interpretive Problems, (8) Outlining, (9) Theology, and (10) Application.
- Bock, Darrell L., and Buist M. Fanning, eds. *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006. Surveys most of the twelve steps that I address in this book for over 300 pages and then includes 150 pages of detailed examples.
- Cameron, Andrew J. B., and Brian S. Rosner, eds. *The Trials of Theology: Becoming a "Proven Worker" in a Dangerous Business*. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010. Part 1 excerpts writings from six past voices: Augustine, Luther, Spurgeon, Warfield, Bonhoeffer, and C. S. Lewis. Part 2 includes present voices, and the highlight is D. A. Carson's chapter: "The Trials of Biblical Studies" (109–29). Carson's essay reflects on five interrelated domains that students in biblical studies must address: (1) four forms of integration, such as not separating technical and devotional Bible study; (2) polar temptations regarding work; (3) five facets of pride; (4) pressures to manipulate Scripture; and (5) three priorities regarding writing. What ties these together is humility.
- Carson, D. A. "Approaching the Bible." In *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, edited by D. A. Carson et al., 1–19. 4th ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994. See especially the second half of the article under the heading "How to Interpret the Bible."
- . *New Testament Commentary Survey*. 7th ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013. Carson shrewdly advises what the best New Testament resources are.
- Croteau, David A. *Urban Legends of the New Testament: 40 Common Misconceptions*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2015. Debunks forty "urban legends" such as these: (1) there was no room at the inn; (2) Jesus died when he was thirty-three;

(3) *hell* referred to a first-century garbage dump near Jerusalem; and (4) women should not wear jewelry. Croteau skillfully uses the appropriate exegetical tools for each job. Sometimes he uses textual criticism or grammar or the literary context or the historical-cultural context. This book is well researched and enjoyable to read.

Duvall, J. Scott, and J. Daniel Hays. *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. A good college-level introduction that covers most of the twelve steps that we address in this book.

Dyer, John. *Best Commentaries: Reviews and Ratings of Biblical, Theological, and Practical Christian Works*. www.bestcommentaries.com/. John Dyer, who has a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary, started this website in 2008. It is especially helpful if you are wondering about the best commentaries to consult on a certain book of the Bible. Dyer is a web developer who has thought a lot about technology (e.g., he wrote a book in 2011 called *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology*), and he puts his skills to good use for this website. He uses a scoring algorithm for commentaries that takes into account how other scholars such as D. A. Carson rate them.

Fee, Gordon D. *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*. 3rd ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002. Another excellent introduction to New Testament exegesis. Fee methodically lays out fifteen steps for exegesis, primarily to help students write research papers. (Blomberg's book is more user-friendly and up to date.)

Guthrie, George H., and J. Scott Duvall. *Biblical Greek Exegesis: A Graded Approach to Learning Intermediate and Advanced Greek*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998. The second half of the book is called "The Exegetical Method" (97–165), and it walks through twelve steps of exegesis that overlap with most of the steps in this book.

Köstenberger, Andreas J., and Richard D. Patterson. *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology*. Invitation to Theological Studies. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011. Nearly 900 pages thoroughly introduce students to hermeneutics. In 2015 Kregel released an even more accessible version of this book that is half the size: *For the Love of God's Word: An Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*.

Naselli, Andrew David. "D. A. Carson's Theological Method." *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 29, 2 (2011): 245–74. I follow D. A. Carson's theological method in this book.

Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006. Comprehensively introduces students to hermeneutics.

Piper, John. *Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017. Part 1 argues from the Bible that our ultimate goal in reading the Bible is to worship God by exalting his infinite

worth and beauty, and parts 2 and 3 explain how reading the Bible is both a supernatural and a natural act.

Plummer, Robert L. *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*. 40 Questions. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010. A master teacher clearly and accessibly introduces readers to hermeneutics.

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