

# INTRODUCTION

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## *What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?*

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Of the making of dictionaries there would seem to be no end. What, then, could possibly justify adding one more item to an already well-stocked inventory? Neither the editors nor the contributors are under the illusion that a new reference work will change the world. Nevertheless, we believe that the time is ripe for a resource that combines an interest in the academic study of the Bible with a passionate commitment to making this scholarship of use to the church. *DTIB* aims to provide clarification, analysis, and evaluation of the various approaches to biblical interpretation currently in the marketplace, with a view to assessing their theological significance—in particular, their value for reading Scripture in and for the community of the faithful.

### **What Theological Interpretation Is Not**

Initially, it is easier to say what theological interpretation of the Bible is *not* rather than what it is.

*Theological interpretation of the Bible is not an imposition of a theological system or confessional grid onto the biblical text.* By theological interpretation, we do not intend to urge readers to return to a time when one's interpretation was largely dominated by one's particular confessional theology (e.g., Lutheran, Reformed, Roman Catholic, et al.). While it may be true that exegesis without theological presuppositions is not possible, it is not part of the dictionary's remit to take sides with a specific confessional or denominational tradition. (On the other hand, we do affirm the ecumenical consensus of the church down through the ages and across confessional lines that the Bible should be read as a unity and as narrative testimony to the identities and actions of God and of Jesus Christ.)

Theological interpretation is not simply what dogmatic theologians do when they use the Bible to support their respective doctrinal positions. Although so-called precritical interpretations took biblical authority seriously and sought to read for the church's edification, they may be vulnerable at three points: They may fail to take the text seriously in its historical context. They may fail to integrate the text into the theology of the OT or NT as a whole. They may be insufficiently critical or aware of their own presuppositions and standpoints (Wright).

***Theological interpretation of the Bible is not an imposition of a general hermeneutic or theory of interpretation onto the biblical text.*** Theological interpretation is also not simply a matter of imposing a *general* hermeneutic on the Bible as if the Bible could be read "like any other book." There are properly theological questions, such as the relationship of the OT and NT, that require more than what is typically offered in a general hermeneutic (Watson). Stated more strongly, there are some interpretative questions that require theological, not hermeneutical, answers: "The turn to hermeneutics as a general discipline ... has not so much offered a resolution of older theological questions, historically considered, as it has changed the subject" (Seitz). There is something left for interpreters to do after reading the Bible like any other book. At the same time, we believe that certain biblical and theological themes have implications not only for biblical interpretation, but for general hermeneutics as well.

***Theological interpretation of the Bible is not a form of merely historical, literary, or sociological criticism preoccupied with (respectively) the world "behind," "of," or "in front of" the biblical text.*** Those who seek to renew biblical interpretation will incorporate whatever is true, noble, right, admirable, and useful in the various historical, literary, and sociological approaches used to describe the world "behind" the text (e.g., in the past), the world "of" the text (e.g., its plot and literary form), or the world "in front of" the text (e.g., the way in which readers receive and react to it). Theological interpretation may not be reduced to historical or to literary or to sociopolitical criticism, but it is not less than these either. For God has been active in history, in the composition of the biblical text, and in the formation of a people to reveal and redeem. Yet each of these disciplines, though ancillary to the project of interpreting the church's Scripture, stops short of a properly theological criticism to the extent that it brackets out a consideration of divine action.

## Why “Theological” Interpretation of the Bible?

*DTIB* responds to two crises precipitated by Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment developments in biblical interpretation respectively: to the modern schism between biblical studies and theology, and to the postmodern proliferation of “advocacy” approaches to reading Scripture where each interpretative community does what is right in its own eyes. The primary purpose of this dictionary is to provide biblical interpreters with a tool that would help make sense of the diverse interpretative approaches and evaluate these approaches as to their contribution toward a theological interpretation of the Bible. Our hope is that this work will provide an important new resource for recovering biblical studies as a properly theological discipline.

*The “ugly ditch” in modern biblical interpretation: between exegesis and theology.* The critical approach to biblical interpretation that has come to dominate the modern study of the Bible, especially in the university but also in seminaries, was developed in order to protect the Bible from what was thought to be its “dogmatic captivity” to confessional and theological traditions. For some two hundred years now, Christian faith has not been thought to be either necessary or relevant in the attempt to discover “what it meant.” Theology thus came to be of only marginal importance for biblical studies as practiced in university and divinity school settings. Indeed, modern biblical studies has become a virtual “theology-free zone.” Even scholars who identify themselves as Christians have to check their theological convictions at the door when they enter the academy (Fowl xii–xxx).

The divide separating biblical studies and theology was nothing less than Lessing’s famous “ugly ditch”: the gap between reason and faith, between publicly ascertainable history on the one hand and privately valued belief on the other. The goal of biblical studies for the typical modern scholar was to understand the texts by restoring them to their original historical contexts and by reading them on their own terms, namely, as (human) products of particular times and places, cultures and societies. In this interpretative framework, the Bible tended to be studied as evidence of a historically developing “religion,” as evidence of how ancient Israelites—and later, Jesus and his followers—tended to think about God, the world, and themselves. To study “religion,” however, is to study human beings and human history—in contrast to “theology” as the study of God and the mighty acts of God.

The problem was not so much with modern biblical scholarship’s interest in

reconstructing historical contexts and the history of the text's composition. The bigger problem was its tendency to treat the biblical texts as sources for reconstructing human history and religion rather than as texts that testify to God's presence and action in history. To treat the Bible as a source—as evidence for some natural phenomenon “behind” it—is to deflect attention away from what the texts are saying (as testimony) in favor of a hypothetical reconstruction of “what actually happened.” History here trumps exegesis.

Interpreted theologically, the ugly ditch may be nothing less than the perceived gap between “nature” and “grace.” Reason, together with its many critical children—source, form, tradition, redaction criticism, and so on—is qualified to interpret the Bible as a historical and human text. But to read the Bible as the word of God is to make a leap into the realm of “grace” that either opposes, crowns, or outflanks reason (Wolters).

***The “muddy ditch” in postmodern biblical interpretation: between exegesis and ideology.*** The Bible-theology relation in the late modern or postmodern era is less an ugly ditch, across which it is impossible to leap, than it is a “muddy ditch”—the quagmire of history, language, tradition, and culture—out of which it is impossible ever to extricate oneself. Postmoderns typically deny that we can escape our location in history, culture, class, and gender. Our readings of the biblical text will be shaped, perhaps decisively so, by our particular location and identity. The goal of interpretation is therefore to discover “what it means to my community, to those with my interpretative interest.” Postmodern readers come to Scripture with a plurality of interpretative interests, including (perhaps) the theological, though no one interest may claim more authority than another. The postmodern situation of biblical interpretation gives rise to a pluralism of interpretative approaches and hence to a legitimation crisis: Whose interpretation of the Bible counts, and why?

Biblical interpretation in postmodernity means that there are no independent standards or universal criteria for determining which of many rival interpretations is the “right” or “true” one. A host of postmodern thinkers has slain the giant assumption behind much modern biblical scholarship that there can be objective, neutral, and value-free reading of biblical texts. Postmodern thinkers have charged modernity's vaunted historical-critical method with being just one more example of an ideologically motivated approach. The critical approach only pretends to be objective, neutral, and value free. Modern biblical critics are as rooted in the contingencies of history and

tradition as everyone else. Indeed, biblical criticism is itself a *confessional* tradition that begins with a faith in reason's unprejudiced ability to discover truth. The question postmoderns raise for historical critics is whether, in exorcising the spirit of faith from biblical studies, they have not inadvertently admitted even more ideological demons into the academic house.

Whereas the temptation of historical criticism is to offer only "thin" descriptions of the world behind the text or of the process of the text's composition, the temptation of ideological criticism is to offer only thinly veiled echoes of one's own voice. To be distracted by what is "behind" or "before" the text, however, is to miss its message; such nontheological biblical criticism is like music criticism by the deaf and art criticism by the blind.

### **What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?**

*DTIB* attempts to provide resources for understanding and engaging the contemporary crises in and around biblical interpretation and for proceeding toward a more constructive engagement with Scripture. Three premises undergird our approach to the theological interpretation of the Bible.

***The theological interpretation of the Bible is not the exclusive property of biblical scholars but the joint responsibility of all the theological disciplines and of the whole people of God.*** It was Gerhard Ebeling who once declared that church history is essentially the history of biblical interpretation. To the extent that this is so, the present crisis in biblical interpretation—the confusion not only over what the Bible means but also over how to read it—is also a crisis for the church. The study of church history can itself be a theological discipline insofar as it helps the present church to learn from previous ways of interpreting Scripture. Indeed, one reason for the increased interest in theological interpretation of the Bible is the recent rehabilitation of the reputation of the church fathers as profound exegetes. Some have even touted "the superiority of pre-critical exegesis" (Steinmetz).

Is biblical studies a theological discipline? By and large, the resounding answer, at least in the setting of the modern university, has been *Nein!* Modern biblical scholars insist that biblical studies must be autonomous in order to be critical (Barr). Yet some degree of involvement with theology seems to be inevitable, for three reasons. First, biblical scholars must have recourse to theology in order to make sense of the text's claims

(Jeanrond). Readings that remain on the historical, literary, or sociological levels cannot ultimately do justice to the subject matter of the texts. Second, biblical studies needs theology (especially the latter's analysis of contemporary culture) in order to be aware of the aims, intentions, and presuppositions that readers invariably bring to the biblical text (Wright). Third, biblical studies needs theology in order to provide a sufficient reason for the academy's continued engagement with the biblical text. Only the assumption that these texts say something of unique importance can ultimately justify the depth of the exegete's engagement (Levenson).

A word about biblical theology is in order, for on the surface this discipline seems a likely candidate to mediate the divide between biblical studies and theology. However, some (e.g., Barr; Fowl) see biblical theology as one more symptom of modern biblical scholarship's assumption that it is possible neutrally and objectively to describe the religious beliefs of the biblical writers. The results of this study—"what it meant" to *them*, back then—are of more antiquarian than ecclesial interest and are offered to the academy, not the church. Yet others (e.g., Watson; Rosner) view biblical theology as an activity that is practically identical with the theological interpretation of the Bible in its concern for hearing the word of God in the church today.

If exegesis without presuppositions is impossible, and if some of these presuppositions concern the nature and activity of God, then it would appear to go without saying that biblical interpretation is always/already theological. One's view of God, for instance, will influence which biblical statements about God one considers literal and which statements one takes as figurative. The inevitability of employing theological categories, however, does not automatically license a wholesale appropriation of any one theological system. Nevertheless, readers with a theological interest, whether in the academy or the church, will at least seek to go further than describing what *others* have said or thought about God. Theological interpreters want to know, on the basis of Scripture and in light of contemporary concerns, what *we* should say and think about God.

Finally, practical theology takes part in biblical interpretation when it inquires into how the people of God should respond to the biblical texts. The way in which the church witnesses, through its language and life, is perhaps the most important form of theological interpretation of the Bible.

***The theological interpretation of the Bible is characterized by a governing interest in God, the word and works of God, and by a governing intention to engage in what we***

*might call “theological criticism.”* Can theological interpretation be “critical,” and if so, in what sense? Historical and literary criticism we know, but with regard to theological criticism, we may be tempted to ask, “Who are you?”

A theological interpretation of the Bible is more likely to be critical of readers than of biblical authors or biblical texts. It is not that text criticism and other forms of criticism have no role; it is rather a matter of the ultimate aim of reading. Those who seek to interpret Scripture theologically want to hear the word of God in Scripture and hence to be transformed by the renewing of their minds ([Rom. 12:2](#)). In this respect, it is important to note that God must not be an “afterthought” in biblical interpretation. God is not simply a function of a certain community’s interpretative interest; instead, God is prior to both the community and the biblical texts themselves. A properly theological criticism will therefore seek to do justice to the priority of God. One way to do so is to guard against idols: images of God manufactured by the interpretative communities.

The dictionary editors believe that the principal interest of the Bible’s authors, of the text itself, and of the original community of readers was theological: reading the Scriptures therefore meant coming to hear God’s word and to know God better. *DTIB* therefore aims not to impose yet another agenda or ideology onto the Bible, but rather to recover the Bible’s original governing interest. On this view, biblical interpretation takes the form of a *confession* or acknowledgment of the work and word of God in and through Scripture.

One should not abandon scholarly tools and approaches in order to interpret the Bible theologically. On the contrary, modern and postmodern tools and methods may be usefully employed in theological interpretation to the extent that they are oriented to illuminating the text rather than something that lay “behind” it (e.g., what actually happened) or “before” it (e.g., the ideological concerns of an interpretative community). At the same time, a theological vantage point calls into question the autonomy of the realm of “nature,” and the autonomy of so-called critical approaches to reading the Bible, in the first place. Neither “nature” nor “knowledge” is ever religiously neutral; from the standpoint of Christian doctrine, “nature” is a divine creation, and “knowledge” is inseparable from some kind of faith. The challenge, therefore, is to employ critical methods, but not uncritically. Critical tools have a ministerial, not magisterial, function in biblical interpretation. The aim of a properly “confessional criticism” (Wolters) is to hear the word of God; a theological criticism is therefore governed by the conviction that

God speaks in and through the biblical texts.

The strongest claim to be made for theological interpretation is that only such reading ultimately does justice to the subject matter of the text itself. Because biblical texts are ultimately concerned with the reality of God, readers must have a similar theological interest (Jeanrond). Theological *text* genres (e.g., Gospels, prophecies, apocalyptic, etc.) call for theological *reading genres*, for styles of reading that proceed from faith and yet seek theological understanding. To read the biblical texts theologically is to read the texts as they wish to be read, and as they should be read in order to do them justice.

*In sum*, DTIB provides a Christian theological evaluation of the contemporary issues and approaches pertaining to biblical interpretation with a view to assessing how they enable the church better to hear what God is saying to church and world today. DTIB thus promises to be a key resource for those involved in the contemporary renaissance of what has come to be known as the “theological interpretation of Scripture.”

***The theological interpretation of the Bible names a broad ecclesial concern that embraces a number of academic approaches.*** At present, no one model of theological interpretation of the Bible holds sway in the church. The editors of DTIB recognize that there is more than one way of pursuing an interest in theological criticism. Because we are only in the initial stages of recovering a distinctly theological interpretation of Scripture, it would be unwise to preempt discussion of how best to read the Bible in the church. In choosing the various contributors, the editors were careful to invite representatives of different theological backgrounds, denominations, and interpretative approaches. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern at least three distinct emphases, more complementary than contradictory, that help us begin to distinguish types of theological interpretation.

Some interpreters have an interest in divine authorship, in the God-world relation “behind” the text as it were. This first type recognizes that our doctrine of God affects the way we interpret the Scriptures, while simultaneously acknowledging that our interpretation of Scripture affects our doctrine of God. Indeed, this two-sided problematic has been designated a matter of “first theology” (Vanhoozer). The focus here is less on establishing “what actually happened” than on reading the Bible in terms of divine authorship or as divinely appropriated human discourse (Wolterstorff). Interpreting Scripture as divine discourse opens up interesting possibilities for discerning the unity among the diversity of biblical books and for relating the two

Testaments. Theological assumptions about God's involvement with the production of Scripture play an important role in how interpreters take or construe the text and in how they deal with thematic developments as well as apparent historical inconsistencies.

A second group of theological interpreters focuses on the final form of the text rather than on questions of human or divine authorship. For these interpreters, it is the text as a finished literary work or narrative that serves as the prime theological witness. One discovers who God is by indwelling the symbolic world of the Bible. Proponents of this second approach seek to interpret the Bible on its own terms, whether these terms be literary (e.g., narrative) or properly religious (e.g., canon). Theology is a matter of "intratextual" reading (Lindbeck) that patiently unfolds the world of the text in order to learn what God was doing in Israel and in Jesus Christ. The God-world relation as depicted in the text thus becomes the framework for understanding today's world too.

Still other interpreters of Scripture identify the theologically significant moment with the reading and reception of the Bible in the believing community today. The divine action that counts for these interpreters is the work of the Holy Spirit, which they locate as much in the present as, if not more than, in the past. What makes biblical interpretation theological is a function of the aims and interests of the community of readers for which the Bible is "Scripture" (Fowl). The focus here is on the world of the Christian community and its members, who seek to live before God and to worship faithfully. The theological interpretation of Scripture is a distinct practice *of the church*, and hence it is regulated by the goods at which that practice aims. The primary concern with the *outcome* of biblical interpretation affords an interesting vantage point from which to assess the relative contribution of various types of biblical criticism and interpretative approaches.

### **The Format of *DTIB***

*DTIB* is intended as a resource for all readers interested in the theological interpretation of Scripture, not merely for those who advocate a particular approach. One purpose of the dictionary is to heal the debilitating breach that all too often prevents biblical scholars and theologians from talking to each other, or even from using the same reference books. If the dictionary accomplishes the purpose for which it was commissioned, it should appeal to biblical scholars, theologians, and pastors alike. Indeed, it should become an indispensable resource for any serious student of the Bible

who also regards it as Scripture—a word from God about God. And this leads to the second purpose: to provide a resource for scholars in other disciplines to employ as they seek to promote biblical wisdom in and for their own disciplinary domains. The theological interpretation of Scripture is as important for scientists and sociologists as it is for exegetes and theologians proper—for all of us need a biblically and theologically informed framework for understanding God, the world, and ourselves.

Articles in the dictionary are arranged alphabetically from A to Z. Many headings are cross-referenced to other topics. Some readers may be interested to know how the editors formulated the list of topics. *DTIB* contains four basic types of articles.

**Texts.** Articles under this heading will focus on the various books of the Bible as well as certain textual features (e.g., canon) that have theological significance. Articles on books of the Bible focus on the message of the text rather than the process of its composition. They also pay special attention to issues of theological significance that have arisen in the history of interpretation and highlight special problems and/or contributions that particular books of the Bible make with regard to doctrine and theology.

**Hermeneutics.** Some articles under this heading will treat issues pertaining to the theory of interpretation; other articles will examine the theories themselves. Articles in this category will also evaluate the suitability of general interpretative approaches for a theological interpretation of the Bible. Articles in this section include philosophical and literary approaches or concepts that have made an impact on biblical studies (e.g., deconstruction, genre).

**Interpreters and Interpretative Communities.** Articles under this rubric will focus on the persons or communities doing the interpreting (e.g., Barth; African biblical interpretation). This category includes topics relating to the interests, presuppositions, ideologies, and traditions of interpretative communities as well. Several articles will focus on certain qualities of the reader that contribute to “theological interpretation of Scripture” (e.g., virtue).

**Doctrines and Themes.** Finally, one group of articles treats explicitly theological concerns, especially as these can and have been brought to bear on the practice of biblical exegesis (e.g., covenant) and vice versa. These articles move in both directions: doctrinal themes arise out of reflection on biblical texts yet these doctrines in turn afford new lenses through which to interpret the text (McGrath). As we have already argued, assumptions about God have an important bearing on our biblical interpretation. Yet

other doctrines too are particularly relevant to how one conceives the task of biblical interpretation. What, for instance, are the effects of sin on biblical interpretation? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation? More importantly, how does our Christology affect our reading of Scripture (and vice versa)? Questions such as these indicate how the worldview implied in Scripture in turn affects how we think about, and engage in, biblical interpretation.

### **Conclusion: Reading to Know God**

Of the making of dictionaries there is no end. Quite so! Yet the “end” of *DTIB*, its most important *raison d’être*, is to help promote the knowledge of God, the good, and the gospel via the practice of biblical interpretation. The ultimate justification for *DTIB* is its utility in helping to promote the knowledge of what God has done in Israel and in Jesus Christ for the good of the world.

The principal thrust of theological interpretation is to direct the interpreter’s attention to the subject matter of Scripture—God, the acts of God in history, the gospel—rather than to a particular theological tradition or, for that matter, to some other topic (e.g., the history of the text’s composition, the secular history “behind” the text, the structure of the text, etc.). The dictionary will explore all these other elements in interpretation with a view to assessing their contribution to helping the reader grow in the knowledge of God.

Theological interpretation of the Bible, we suggest, is biblical interpretation oriented to the knowledge of God. For much of their history, biblical studies, theology, and spirituality were all aspects of a single enterprise, that of knowing God (McIntosh). Knowing God is more than a merely academic exercise. On the contrary, knowing God, like theological interpretation of the Bible itself, is at once an intellectual, imaginative, and spiritual exercise. To know God as the author and subject of Scripture requires more than intellectual acknowledgment. To know God is to love and obey him, for the knowledge of God is both restorative and transformative.

Theological interpretation of the Bible achieves its end when readers enter into the world of the biblical texts with faith, hope, and love. When we make God’s thoughts become our thoughts and God’s word become our word, we begin to participate in the world of the text, in the grand drama of divine redemption. This is perhaps the ultimate aim of theological interpretation of the Bible: to know the triune God by participating in the triune life, in the triune mission to creation.

No one denomination, school of interpretation, or hermeneutical approach has a monopoly on reading the Bible for the word of God. Insights from the whole body of Christ—a body animated and guided by the Spirit of Christ—are needed if Christians are to display the mind of Jesus Christ.

In sum, the aim of this dictionary is to provide the resources necessary to respond to what for Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752) was the biblical interpreter’s prime directive: “Apply yourself wholly to the text; apply the text wholly to yourself.”

Interpreting Scripture theologically is the way to read the Bible “for a blessing” (Kierkegaard), for the sake of human flourishing, for the individual and social “good.” Dictionaries are not schools of sanctification, of course; yet the ultimate aim of the present work is to commend ways of reading Scripture that lead to the blessing of knowing God and of being formed unto godliness.

### ***Bibliography***

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