

Wycliffe College

Theological Interpretation of Scripture:
The Reformation of Modern Biblical Scholarship

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Blurring the Lines Between Biblical Studies and Theology: What are the advantages and disadvantages of approaching biblical interpretation through a theological framework?

Modern scholarship has converted the Bible, a book concerning the creative and redemptive purposes of God, into an anthropology textbook. In many academic circles, the only viable approaches to reading Scripture rule out theology. In the university setting, along with many protestant divinity schools, faith has been granted minimal importance to the process of biblical interpretation. Instead, modern and postmodern ideologies have made approaching passages as a scientific study free from the baggage of presuppositions the exegetical ideal. Resultantly, the Bible is treated like any other historical text. Within these hermeneutical frameworks (historical criticism, for example), the Bible tends to be studied as a human book providing the historical evidence of Israelites and Jesus followers and the outline of their religious worldview. A theological book regarding God and His mighty acts has been treated as an anthropological study of human religion.

In response to this theological deficit in modern biblical studies, an approach to hermeneutics known as the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (hereafter TIS) has been suggested. This involves blending the lines between biblical studies and theology by approaching biblical interpretation through a theological framework. “TIS is a family of interpretive approaches that privileges theological readings of the Bible in due recognition of the theological nature of Scripture, its ultimate theological message, and/or the theological interests of its readers.”¹ A theological framework approach to scripture is defined by three fundamental elements. Firstly, Scripture is viewed as the very Word of God, completely true in what it affirms, and the ultimate authority. Secondly, theological presuppositions are embraced in acknowledgement of the Bible’s intrinsically theological claims. Lastly, it recognizes the theological outlook of the interpreter; their concerns and commitments. This

¹ Gregg R. Allison, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: An Introduction and Preliminary Evaluation,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 14.2, (2010): 29.

essay will outline the various advantages and disadvantages of participating in biblical studies using this method. Despite pitfalls and potential disadvantages, approaching biblical interpretation through a theological framework is a profitable practice for academics and does great justice to the claims of the text.

The locution of Scripture naturally lends itself to being interpreted through a theological framework. “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... 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.”² Consider some of the theological claims the Bible makes. 2 Timothy 3:16 states that all Scripture is ‘theopneustos’ - inspired by God or God-breathed. Hebrews 4:12 speaks of the Bible as the living and active word of God. 2 Peter 1:21 claims that the prophets spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. The first and foremost advantage of approaching biblical interpretation through a theological framework is that it gives due recognition to the theological message of Scripture. The Bible ultimately concerns itself with the foundational reality of God; consequently, appropriate interpretation comes from this viewpoint. Professor and theologian Kevin J. Vanhoozer bluntly remarks that approaching biblical interpretation without the theological framework presented in the Bible itself is like a deaf person providing music criticism.

Not only does the Bible lend itself to being read with theological presuppositions, but its writers themselves also practiced this method. Two examples from both the Old and New Testament illustrate how Scripture intrinsically warrants this hermeneutic. King David of Israel wrote approximately seventy-three of the biblical songs known as the Psalms. The songs reflect David’s theological presuppositions in interpreting the Pentateuch. For example, in Psalm 8:3-4 he writes, “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon

² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Introduction: What is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 2005), 22.

and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour.”³ In this passage, the king reflects on God’s act of creation in Genesis 1 and 2. His fundamental beliefs in God as Creator and a high view of human beings as image-bearers of God are evident in how he has taken those truths to write a song. His theological interpretation of Genesis shines through.

The writings of the apostle Paul throughout the New Testament reveal the Christian theological framework he used to interpret and teach the Old Testament. In 1 Corinthians 8-10, Paul explains that the gospel changes how the Corinthian church should view food offered to pagan idols. He concludes that one is neither worse nor better if they eat this food or not; as long as they are not a stumbling block to the weak. Paul reasons that there is no God but one and one Lord Jesus; which means idols are nothing at all in the world. Commenting on this, David I. Starling writes, “The content of Paul’s summary is clearly grounded in the testimony of scripture [and] refracted through the lens of the gospel’s claims about the identity and universal lordship of the risen Jesus.”⁴ In other words, Paul used his gospel-centred presuppositions to interpret Old Testament food laws in order to help the Corinthians deal with their present situation. All in all, these two cases evidence the major advantage of using a theological framework approach to hermeneutics in that the biblical authors used a similar method themselves.

Although the Bible lends naturally itself to this interpretative method, a disadvantage of using a theological framework approach is its susceptibility to confirmation bias. “Scripture passages are not wholly determinative on their own, fitting seamlessly as propositions into a pre-established system of theology. The word of God in Scripture is

³ Psalm 8:3-5, NIV.

⁴ David I. Starling, *Hermeneutics as Apprenticeship: How the Bible Shapes Our Interpretive Habits and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 138.

something that encounters us again and again; it surprises, confuses, and enlightens us.”⁵

Approaching the biblical text with a theological framework in mind can keep one from being taught and challenged by the text. It may lead to a type of eisegesis where passages are picked to fit preconceived ideas rather than exegesis where meaning and truth come from the text itself. Instead of letting Scripture speak, the reader categorizes it into their pre-existing framework. The method may dangerously lead the reader into picking and choosing the parts of Scripture that fit nicely into their presuppositions and thus controlling the text.

Related to the issue of confirmation bias, this hermeneutical approach makes the practice of correcting wrong theology more difficult. “How can our theology receive any kind of correction if our reading of Scripture already inherently contains our theology? We will simply find what we are looking for.”⁶ Interpreters who take on a theological framework approach to biblical studies may be disadvantaged when it comes to their theology’s fluidity. Instead of letting the Scriptures themselves dictate their theological framework, the presuppositions of the reader will only ever be confirmed. Accordingly, a viable theological framework approach will remain rigid when it comes to core biblical beliefs and open to change regarding secondary issues.

On the flip side of the confirmation bias pitfall, TIS guards against blatant misinterpretation and heresy. Throughout church history, fundamental theological presuppositions from the Scriptures themselves were placed in creeds and confessions as boundary markers for biblical interpretation. “In countering heretics who used Scripture to pit the OT God of Israel against the NT God revealed in Jesus Christ, for example, Irenaeus posited that the proper reading of Scripture requires a key... to arrange and assess the various pieces of Scripture properly, to obtain an accurate sketch of the gospel narrative and its

⁵ J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: an Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 8.

⁶ Charlie Trimm, “Evangelicals, Theology, and Biblical Interpretation: Reflections on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20.3, (2010): 317.

ontological implications.”⁷ The early church fathers had a key known as the ‘Rule of Faith’ which ruled out interpretations conflicting with sanctioned boundaries. This key contained core Biblical beliefs about God, His trinitarian nature, creation, sin, Christ’s death and resurrection, and the second coming. Any interpretation that conflicted with these boundary markers was considered heresy and discarded. Similarly, when modern interpreters participate in hermeneutics, having a Scripturally-based theological framework will protect them from common misunderstandings. This is a major advantage of TIS.

On top of the protection a theological framework brings, the result of this hermeneutical method is a degree of objectivity that postmodern practices fail to provide. The plurality of different approaches to biblical studies in a postmodern age leads to a major issue of legitimacy. Without absolute truth, one single approach does not have more authority over another. This ends with a jumble of logically contradictory interpretations accepted as equally true by postmodern thinkers. One cannot help but question which interpretation of the Bible actually counts or matters. Although no reader of Scripture can make perfect interpretations, maintaining a theological framework approach will aid one to arrive at the objective truths the biblical authors intended to convey. Since it takes the words of the Bible as God’s, the result of TIS is real truths. Overall, an advantage of the theological framework approach to hermeneutics is the degree of objectivity it produces.

Although TIS may lead one closer to the truth, there remains a difference between the divine interpretations of Scripture by biblical authors and those of other readers. Earlier, King David and the apostle Paul’s examples were given to show that the biblical authors used their pre-existing theological framework to interpret Scripture. However, according to the Bible, these authors were divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit to make such interpretations. Although the Spirit illumines believers to God’s truth, one cannot be quick to give the same

⁷ Daniel J. Treier and Uche Anizor, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture and Evangelical Systematic Theology: Iron Sharpening Iron?” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 14.2, (2010): 7.

hermeneutical authority to modern interpreters or the early church fathers. Resultantly, the degree of authority granted to reformers, early church fathers, creeds, and confessions can leave TIS practitioners at a disadvantage. It puts them at risk of obscuring the voice of the divinely-inspired biblical authors by imposing the concepts of other voices on the text. A disadvantage of this hermeneutical approach is the risk of giving non-inspired interpretations the same authority as biblical authors.

Along with giving too much authority to non-inspired interpreters, another disadvantage of TIS is its overemphasis of theology in the practice of hermeneutics. The valuable time and thinking involved in the process of hermeneutics may be misallocated to theology with this method. Asking what theology can teach one about Scripture or how one's theology fits into the teaching of the Bible are valid questions. However, there are many other questions to ask and important practices involved in exegesis. For example, in devoting too much effort to theological matters, the significant historical details for understanding the author's intended meaning may be missed. Word studies that illuminate the truths of God's Word may be neglected in too much theological reflection. For successful TIS, proponents will need to find a balance of priorities in their hermeneutical practice.

Approaching biblical interpretation through a theological framework brings the Bible back into the context of the whole people of God; the universal church. The writer of Proverbs says, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."⁸ When Scripture is read outside of the church context in individual study, important truths can be lost. "Scholars need to read the Bible not only alone in their studies but also with others... because interpreting the Bible is more than a scientific method. Reading in community helps to prevent us from misreading the Bible and importing too much of our own perspective into the text."⁹ Each interpreter comes to the text with a limited perspective. The power of reading

⁸ Proverbs 27:17, NIV.

⁹ Trimm, *Bulletin*, 314.

Scripture as the church is that it broadens perspective, encourages critical refinement and reform, and helps readers to recognize their assumptions. The theological framework approach to biblical studies lends itself to the setting of the church. As members of the church each engage in this approach, united by the common core beliefs of Scripture, interpretations will be refined and strengthened. A major strength of TIS lies in how it fosters biblical hermeneutics within the church community.

Lastly, the theological framework approach helps one to unify the Old and New testaments by clarifying teaching and enriching the interpretative process. For example, the doctrine of the trinity in the New Testament may help one to make sense of the relational nature of God in the Old Testament. One must be careful not to read the texts anachronistically; however, some natural connections can be made. In the Old Testament God always exists in relationship and covenant with His people. In the New Testament, God continues to have relationships with humanity. On top of this, the internal relationship within the Godhead of Father, Son, and Spirit is revealed. Consequently, a reader with trinitarian theological presuppositions from the New Testament will be able to better understand God's relational nature as they read the Old Testament. They will see the relationships that God has with Old Testament figures as an extension of God's inherent relational nature as a trinitarian being. The insights gained from a unified view of the Old and New Testaments are another advantage of TIS.

In summation, blurring the lines between biblical studies and theology comes with many challenges. Embracing theological presuppositions leaves one susceptible to confirmation bias. One who practices this method will find it difficult to change their wrong theology because they may read it into the text. Furthermore, the theological frameworks brought to the text by modern interpreters or the church fathers are not inspired in the same way as the biblical authors. TIS also overemphasizes theological questions in the process of

hermeneutics. On the other hand, however, the benefits of approaching biblical interpretation through a theological framework seem to outweigh the negatives. The Scriptures lend themselves to TIS as they are inherently theological. It treats the book fairly as a testimony of God's existence and workings in human history. The biblical authors themselves employed this kind of interpretation method in recognition of the Bible's nature. The method also guards against misinterpretation; leading to objective truth in a postmodern world. Another major strength of bringing a theological approach is how it brings the process of interpretation back to the church. Finally, it clarifies connections between the Old and New Testaments, helping the reader fit Scripture into its wider context.

All in all, weighing up the strengths and weaknesses of TIS reveals it as a useful hermeneutic. In light of dangers and disadvantages, a refined theological framework approach to biblical interpretation will bring many benefits to academic study and pay due respect to the nature of the Bible. The world of academia will benefit from the richness and new insights provided by TIS practitioners. It must be recognized that one cannot approach biblical studies without presuppositions. Embracing a hermeneutic that respects the Scriptures as God's word does justice to it and results in objective truths. A healthy and useful theological hermeneutic will recognize and humbly embrace the presuppositions that will inevitably be brought to interpretation. It will be rigid when it comes to fundamental beliefs such as the Trinitarian God, the incarnation, and second coming, providing a broad outline for the interpretive journey. However, it will be fluid enough not to give all the answers, allowing the Word to influence and change peripheral theological standpoints. Successful theological framework approaches will first ask if one's theology fits with what the Bible is teaching before asking what their theology can teach them about the passage. TIS will be also done well in community. The Bible should be read with an individual's theological lenses, but it should also be discussed and challenged by those with different

viewpoints. Successful TIS will make distinctions between the objective truth of what the author intended to teach and the subjective context-specific applications. Overall, with such guidelines in place, approaching biblical interpretation through a theological framework will be quite beneficial.

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