

PRIMER ON  

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BIBLICAL METHODS

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Cover image: *Biblia latina* (Bible in Latin). England, thirteenth century. Manuscript on vellum. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

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# A QUICK GUIDE TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

## FOREWORD FOR THE INSTRUCTOR

I teach theology in a Catholic university, primarily to students who are taking courses to fulfill general requirements. Typically they have little patience for obscure theories or arcane facts, but that doesn't mean they're not interested in theological questions. Spiritual questions are as important to them as they were to college students when I was their age. The problem is that many theological textbooks are not written to target this particular audience. Many of these students particularly want to know more about the Bible. So a couple of years ago, I wrote a textbook for use with my undergraduate students, *Encountering Ancient Voices: A Guide to Reading the Old Testament* (Anselm Academic, 2006).

Some professors who have considered using this textbook would prefer something a bit less comprehensive regarding the biblical text itself for the courses that they teach. Instead, they would rather supplement their lectures with a handbook that teaches students about modern methods of biblical interpretation. That is the purpose of this primer. Because this is not strictly an introductory textbook, it presumes that students have access to terms common in biblical studies, so it does not define some of the more common biblical vocabulary. If students are entirely novice to the

enterprise of biblical studies, a glossary of biblical terms might be a handy adjunct to this text.

In the past I have used Daniel Harrington's *Interpreting the New Testament: A Practical Guide* and *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Practical Guide* (Michael Glazier, 1979 and 1981, respectively). These books are written in a clear, direct manner and give a blueprint students can follow. However, the books are also dated and do not include discussions of methods that probably speak most urgently to contemporary students, methods like feminist criticism or new historicism. This primer uses Harrington's books as a model, but expands the discussion to include these newer methods. Each chapter also includes brief exercises for students to practice each method, applying it to both Old and New Testament examples. Adaptability is a further virtue of this primer, as each chapter can stand alone, so that instructors can pick and choose the material most useful to them.

Where appropriate, I have also included some discussions of theological issues that students face in specifically Christian contexts. In addition, the final section of the book gives some examples of the history of Christian biblical interpretation. These include examples from Catholic theology, the context in which I teach, as well as from other Christian denominations; however, because of the brevity of this primer, these latter are necessarily limited.

This book is designed for beginners in biblical studies. My goal is to introduce them to the critical methods of biblical interpretation that will make them better readers of the text. I have tried to write a guide that both affirms the students' desire to learn more and gently challenges them to adopt more complex reading strategies that are better suited for our twenty-first-century world.

## FOREWORD FOR THE STUDENT

"Why can't we just read the plain meaning of the text?" a student asked. It was early in the spring semester a few years ago, and I was teaching an upper-division course on women in the Old Testament to students who were fulfilling their general education requirements. My questioner, a bright senior engineering major, just couldn't understand why we had to ask all these different questions about a text that to

him was perfectly clear. Why make something as simple as the Bible so complicated? Fortunately, by the end of the course, this student realized how much he missed when he restricted his understanding of a text to his own initial conclusions based on a cursory reading.

This student asked out loud what many students silently wonder: why learn to ask systematic questions of a biblical text? The first and most important reason is that these methods of investigation make us better readers of *any* text, including the Bible. The methods discussed here developed out of the understanding of the ways all authors write and the way individuals and communities interpret that writing. These methods also provide scholars a common vocabulary and strategies for investigation and reporting about the meaning of a text.

In addition, understanding these methods of investigation helps students evaluate the claims made in the world today about biblical truth. One of the first exercises that I have my students do is to evaluate the claims made about the Bible from recent newspaper articles. I have never been at a loss to find such articles. Christianity, with its focus on the Bible, is a significant cultural force in much of the contemporary world, including of course the United States and Canada, but often the same students who are quite able to evaluate claims made about science or the economy are at a loss when it comes to evaluating claims made about the Bible. No educated person in the world today, especially in North America, should be so naïve when it comes to such claims.

The purpose of this primer, then, is to make students better readers of biblical texts. It teaches them a series of questions about the text that stem from what scholars call “critical” methods, not because these methods are critical of the truth claims of the Bible, but because they analyze and critique the data at hand.

After a general introduction that addresses theological issues, each section of this primer devotes itself to a different method or approach to interpreting the Bible. This handbook is divided into four parts. In the first part, I introduce methods designed to reconstruct some aspects of the text’s production, or what some call “the world behind the text.” Part 2 focuses on methods meant to draw out the meaning of the texts themselves, regardless of their production. Part 3 provides a guide to some of the contemporary reading

communities that engage in biblical studies. This includes a discussion of explicitly theological readings. Part 4, which is devoted to an ever-growing interest in the history of biblical interpretation, provides some examples of important reading traditions that have shaped contemporary communities of faith.

Each section introduces individual methods. For each method I provide first a general introduction to the method, followed by its application within Old Testament studies and then within New Testament scholarship. As a summary for each method, I offer some questions typical of those asked by the method, as well as targeted exercises for applying the method.

## EXEGESIS AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Traditionally, guides to methods of biblical interpretation were designed to help seminary students write “exegesis papers,” an exercise that is especially useful for those preparing to preach. Exegesis is the process of reading a text through the systematic application of a series of methods of biblical interpretation, with the purpose of arriving at an overall conclusion regarding the meaning of that text. The Greek word we translate as *exegesis* originally meant “to lead out,” and it names the process of teasing out the meaning of a text. Its opposite is *eisigesis*, which is the process of reading *in* to a text meanings that are not properly there.

An exegesis paper focuses on drawing out the meaning of one particular biblical passage (often called a *pericope*). To practice exegesis, the student analyzes a text using a series of methods such as those described in this book. It was standard practice twenty years ago to assign students to do an exegesis, which teaches them the breadth of questions that can be asked of a text. Students practiced in exegesis are able to answer the question posed by my student: why do we need to do this? They have learned to uncover meanings in a text—meanings that are actually quite clear when looked at through a different lens.

While this book can be used as a guide for students who are writing an exegesis paper, it has other uses as well. Some of the most common resources for biblical studies are various biblical

commentaries written by experts in the field. Different commentary series have different focuses, but they all tend to apply various methods of biblical interpretation systematically to a particular biblical book. It is impossible for students to harvest the treasures in these resources if they do not understand the questions the commentaries are meant to address.

Finally, even when my students do not write a classic exegesis paper, I insist that they read various opinions about the meaning of a text. They are always amazed by how many different interpretations of a text there are, and how their own interpretation can be changed by reading the viewpoints of others. A historical survey of marriage customs in the time of David is quite different from a feminist analysis of the story of David's marriage to Bathsheba. Yet both provide essential insights into 2 Samuel 11.

Many handbooks discuss these methods more fully, and I include a brief bibliography in this primer as well.

## THEOLOGY AND ANALYSIS: FRIENDS OR FOES?

Students at religiously affiliated universities often wonder about the relationship between critical study of the Bible and the way the Bible is proclaimed in a specific church. I find that this question is even more pressing for students who have had some religious education. What we do in a university classroom feels very different to them from the way they are used to hearing the Bible explained. Sometimes students conclude that the two approaches and the "meanings" they convey are simply incompatible, and that what they are learning in a classroom setting is wrong, destructive, and wholly negative or hostile to what they learned in their church or other religious education setting.

I can certainly understand their conclusions, but they are most often mistaken. Certainly a given professor could set out to destroy someone's faith, but most of my colleagues have deep faith lives themselves and profoundly respect the faith lives of their students. In addition, many Christian denominations, as well as Jewish traditions, value the critical methods because of the ways they support serious consideration and understanding of various theological

issues. I include in this primer a brief discussion of some of these theological issues.

Sometimes people claim that to be a “Christian” means that you must believe that everything the Bible says is true. A related question and also a source of division for some Christian denominations is, who wrote the Bible? The question of how to read the Bible stems in part from this question of authorship.

When the word *author* is used today, it usually means quite simply a person who wrote the words in a text. While most Christians would say that the biblical texts were written by human beings inspired by God, the model for this interaction between humanity and God can differ significantly. Some Christians hold to a model of divine dictation: God telling a human author exactly what to write. Others think of inspiration differently, seeing the Bible as the product of true human authorship, while understanding inspiration to mean that God is encountered in an inspired text, not because the text was produced in some miraculous, otherworldly way, but because God chooses to be revealed in this humanly produced writing. Each religious tradition merits its own careful study to understand its view of human-divine authorship or inspiration, as well as the relationship of those views to the tradition’s understanding of creation, natural reason, and other matters.

Furthermore, Christian churches also say that the Bible is *inerrant*, which means that it is free from error. While some Christians, such as many evangelical Christians, would say that everything in the Bible is inerrant, including scientific and historical information, others state that the Bible is inerrant in matters of salvation. What this means is that when the Bible communicates things that people need to know to live a life that leads to salvation, they can count on the Bible being free of error. This view of inerrancy does not depend on whether the scientific or historical information in the Bible is factually correct.

This primer is written from the belief that human authors acted as human authors when creating the biblical text. As such it assumes that biblical scholars must use every means available to understand that text within its own historical-cultural context, as a literary product, and as preached to living communities. This means that a biblical text can and should be analyzed in the same way as any other

text. Students can ask about the purpose of the text's production. They can research the writing conventions at the time and look for other writings that may have influenced a particular author. They can uncover some of the unconscious influences on a work, such as assumptions about the relationships between men and women, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile. They can ask how the genre of the text affects its meaning. These questions and others like them help religious communities better understand the theological significance of the text, because they aid in the process of making the text understandable to a contemporary audience.

## PART 1

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# THE WORLD BEHIND THE TEXT

This section is devoted to historical critical methods, that is, methods of biblical interpretation designed to place the text within its historical, social, and cultural contexts. Sometimes people refer to the historical critical method as if it is a single thing, which is misleading. Although these methods are unified in their aim, they represent a variety of different tools that aid in achieving that goal. For example, some focus on what we can know about the author of a given text, whereas others look at ancient cultural practices that explain the content of the text.

Although theologians have always been interested in the text's original meaning, they began to articulate the historical critical methods after the Enlightenment for many complex reasons, including the desire to settle disagreements and to provide more reliable ways to talk about the meaning of the Bible. To achieve these goals, they developed some standard approaches to interpretation of the biblical text.

Recently a scattering of critiques of the historical critical methods have surfaced. Some of these come from Christian theologians who conclude that the historical critical methods are either hostile to a theological reading or at least a roadblock to one. One reason this critique arose was that in its early days, historical criticism claimed too much certainty in its ability to uncover *the* meaning of a text. However, since at least the 1970s, biblical scholars have abandoned the claim that a text has only one given meaning that historical criticism can uncover. The kind of openness to meaning that some

readers find necessary for a theological reading is no longer undercut by contemporary uses of historical critical methods.

In addition, most contemporary Jewish and Christian communities affirm the importance of the text's original meaning as a necessary element in considering its ongoing relationship to their faith community. The Roman Catholic document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (1993), for instance, states, "The historical-critical method is the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts" (sec. I.A.). Similarly, the *United Methodist Member's Handbook* states that the first question a reader of the Bible should ask is, "What did this passage mean to its original hearers?" This section of the book will first consider the following topics:

- the reconstruction of written sources an ancient author may have used to compose a text (source criticism)
- the oral traditions used by a given author (form criticism)
- the identification of traditions that an author employs in constructing new texts (tradition criticism)
- the way a final author has put a text together (redaction criticism)
- the historical circumstances that have led an author to write a given text (historical analysis)
- the role social location and social convention play in the way texts are produced and preserved (sociological analysis)

These methods help explain aspects of a text's production. They do not address every aspect of a text's meaning, nor its ongoing significance to communities of readers. These will be covered in subsequent sections of the book. From the start, then, it should be apparent that no single method of biblical interpretation is meant to stand on its own. Each is only one piece, or one set of questions, meant to break open the possible meanings of a particular text.

## SOURCE CRITICISM

Historical critical methods ask the researcher to imagine the person who actually wrote a particular text centuries ago. How scholars

conceive of this person affects how they will investigate the history of the text's production. If a particular scholar holds a view of inspiration that imagines the biblical author simply copying down what he (and usually people assume the writer must be male because all of the scribes named in the Bible are male) has heard God say, then such a moment is unavailable to historical "proof." But if a scholar imagines someone passing on sacred lore, or recording an eyewitness account of events, or even inventing texts entirely, then the scholar might ask questions about where the author got this information and what things might have influenced the writing.

Historical research in any field presumes that human nature has remained relatively constant throughout human history. If readers take seriously the notion that God uses human authors as vehicles for divine revelation, then they should be imagining someone like us in an ancient context. For example, I would assume that if the author is trying to relate the history of Israel, he would have tried to produce one that conformed to the ancients' standards of historical writing. From what we know about history writing in the ancient world, while it would have included some use of sources to provide an accurate account of events, the author also would have enjoyed more liberty than a modern historian to manipulate those sources to communicate more clearly why he was telling this history.

In a culture where honoring one's elders was a vital social value, one which preserved oral traditions, I would also expect that the author would have had respect for the information he had inherited. In a society where the production of texts was expensive, I would also expect that any written sources he had available to him would have carried a certain weight, since only the most important information or traditions would have been committed to writing. Therefore, if an author had access to written material, he would likely have given that material serious consideration when he wrote his own text. Plenty of evidence from the ancient world suggests that this was the case.

In sum, source criticism looks for evidence that an author has used written sources in the production of a new text. It does this by looking at repetitions, changes in style, variations in vocabulary, and other such evidence that would result from an author combining previously written sources to create a new text.

## Old Testament

Source criticism arose from the evidence of the text itself and not from the recovery of ancient manuscripts. For example, scholars noticed that a text like Genesis, chapters 12–22, which in most respects seemed to be a continuous narrative, was in fact better described as a cycle of Abrahamic traditions that are episodic and disjointed. Some rather glaring anomalies in Genesis, for example, made this apparent:

- In three stories, one of the patriarchs claims that his wife is his sister, placing her sexual purity at risk. These three stories share many odd details that would not be the result of the retelling of a common story.
- In the story of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen 21:15 – 16), the boy appears to be an infant or toddler. However, according to the chronology of the text, he is well over fourteen years old.
- In Genesis 6:3, God limits human life to 120 years, but Abraham lives to 175 (Gen 25:17) and Sarah to 127 (Gen 23:1).

Source criticism also provides a model for imagining the writing process that led to the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) and other biblical books as we now have them. Using source criticism, scholars have developed models for understanding the anomalies and discrepancies within Genesis.

One of the better scholarly theories imagines the author of the Pentateuch relying on multiple sources when compiling the books. Archaeological discoveries have provided evidence that it was common practice for authors to freely use and adapt earlier material. It was a way of showing respect for earlier scribes.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a four-source theory for the Pentateuch was well established. Julius Wellhausen published the most influential version of this model in *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*, using theories of religious development in addition to literary cues in the texts themselves. Here are some of the features of each of the four written sources used by the final author of the Pentateuch as described by Wellhausen:

	Yahwist (J)	Elohist (E)	Deuteronomist (D)	Priestly Writer (P)
<b>Date</b>	United monarchy	Divided monarchy	Reign of Josiah (Judah alone)	End of the Exile
<b>Place</b>	Southern Kingdom	Northern Kingdom	Northern Kingdom	Judah
<b>Divine Name</b>	Uses Yahweh throughout the Pentateuch	Elohim used exclusively until the divine name is introduced in Exodus	Not applicable	Elohim used exclusively until the divine name is introduced in Exodus
<b>Religious Features</b>	Sacrifices are offered in different locations; priests and heads of household offered sacrifices	Sacrifices are offered in different locations; priests and heads of household offered sacrifices	Only the Levites can make sacrifices in the one place God chooses	Only the offspring of Aaron can make sacrifices; a single place of sacrifice is presumed
<b>Literary Features</b>	Lively narrative and anthropomorphic view of God	Lively narrative and anthropomorphic view of God	Sermonic, with characteristic phrases	Preserves traditions, such as genealogies, precise locations, ages, and so on; regal view of God

Currently aspects of Wellhausen's four-source model are debated, not because biblical scholars reject the idea that ancient authors used sources, but because they question whether four sources is overly simplistic. In addition, they wonder about the date and provenance of the sources.

Over the past century, scholarly convictions regarding the presence and identity of D and P have remained firm. These sources use distinct language and have a recognizable literary style. Each has a consistent theology. They probably represent the work of schools of thought rather than the production of a single literary genius because each source evidences the use and development of earlier material.

One of the big questions for D is its extent and date. Is D limited to the book of Deuteronomy, or can it be found in other parts