

GETTING THE MESSAGE



A Plan for Interpreting
and Applying the Bible

Revised and Expanded

DANIEL M. DORIANI

R&R
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I dedicate this edition to my granddaughters,
Frankie Briar Savio and Gwyn Doriani Mafazy,
whose love, energy, and smiles have endeared them to
our entire family from their earliest days onward.

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Preface

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With this book I hope to equip church leaders for the arduous but exhilarating task of interpreting and applying the Scriptures with confidence. Since it seeks to instill skills, this book is for people who teach the Bible. Whether you read primarily to remind yourself of familiar principles, to organize scattered efforts, or to prepare for a teaching ministry, exegesis is a skill, and we grow in skills by practicing them.

Motivated disciples can acquire substantial skill, even without learning the biblical languages, if they have solid translations and other resources. This book is a serious but nontechnical introduction to Bible interpretation. It has been a textbook for teenagers, college students, and seminarians and has found its way into the hands of Christian leaders on each inhabited continent. No one can erase his or her cultural roots, but I have enlisted international readers to minimize Western illustrations and assumptions, so that the book can serve the wider church. This volume is for students of all ages and life situations.

Getting the Message presents the steps of interpretation in the order in which students of Scripture actually use them. In the acronym CAPTOR, each letter stands for a phase of interpretation: C = *context*, A = *analysis*, P = *problems*, T = *themes*, O = *obligations*, R = *reflection*. After introductory chapters, readers proceed through the phases of CAPTOR. Students of Scripture need not take every step in every study. Thus, chapter 8 presents the steps for a topical Bible study. Chapter 4 describes the background studies that are prominent at the start of a book study. A final chapter offers suggestions for

getting started, and the appendices offer more information for the interested reader. This work isn't innovative, but it does give more attention to application than most introductions to interpretation.

As the author, I have several convictions. First, the Bible is the inspired, true, reliable record of both God's acts in history and their meaning. Second, while I essentially follow the grammatical-historical method of exegesis, I draw on methods from other aspects of life. Because the Bible is a literary work that uses rhetorical methods to gain a response from its readers, using literary and rhetorical tools is sensible. There is no need to fear those methods.¹ If the interpreter has a high view of Scripture, methods are simply tools used to understand the various facets of the Bible. From shovels to telephones to the Internet, the effect of most tools depends chiefly on the intentions of the people using them.

Every author is a debtor. I remain grateful to Covenant Theological Seminary for granting the sabbatical during which I wrote the first edition of this book and then for assigning me a load that let me revise it in 2021. My colleagues have fostered an academic community in which each member promotes the success of the rest. The friendly suggestions of Brian Aucker, Mark Pfuetze, Mark Ryan, and Russ St. John strengthened the work greatly. Kagiso Motaung helped me locate and expunge Americanisms and offered additional suggestions. Others have a fingerprint in this book; Daryl Madi and Christina and Tommy Hannah stand out for timely research assistance. I owe the deepest debt to my wife, Debbie, who packed up the possessions of a family of five, moved to New Haven for a sabbatical, and made a small apartment into a home and day school for three bright girls while I hid in the bowels of Yale's libraries for the first edition. She offered patient love and care in difficult months for the second.

1. Certain methods can put the reader in the position of judge over Scripture. This book rejects methods that assume that we cannot discover the meaning of a text, so that readers must construct it for themselves. It also opposes the hermeneutic of suspicion, which holds that whatever the surface meaning of a text, at root all authors use texts to gain power over others.

Abbreviations

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CAPTOR	context, analysis, problems, themes, obligations, reflection
CEV	Contemporary English Version
CSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
ESV	English Standard Version
FCF	fallen-condition focus
ISBE	<i>The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i> , ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, rev. ed., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979–88)
KJV	King James Version
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIRV	New International Reader's Version
NIV	New International Version ¹
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version Bible
RHF	redemptive-historical focus
RSV	Revised Standard Version

1. Throughout, NIV after a quotation means that the wording in the current and 1984 editions is the same. NIV 1984 specifies that particular edition.

Introduction

Is There an Interpreter in the House?

Anyone who believes that God has spoken with unique authority in the Bible has reason to learn the methods of effective Bible study. But Bible study takes work, so we need motives to learn how to interpret Scripture. Imagine that it is Sunday morning. A guest speaker has read passages from the Old Testament that feature polygamy; then he speaks:

My experiences in Africa and my study of Scripture have convinced me that it's time to reevaluate the church's teaching on polygamy. For years, I ignored people who asked questions about polygamy during the old covenant. Then the Lord granted me success with village chiefs in Togo. When they confessed Christ, we had them send away their second and third wives and their children. Instead of preserving the dignity of marriage, it destroyed the women. Most became beggars or prostitutes while their children became outcasts. Some chiefs, seeing this, refused to become Christians. What's more, the women don't mind polygamy. One told me, "The day my husband took a second wife was the happiest of my life. Now I have someone to share the work, and she is like a sister."

In the Bible, Abraham, Jacob, and David were polygamists. The Lord rebuked all three men for their sins, but he never condemned their polygamy. Meanwhile, Jesus condemned oaths and divorce; he never forbade polygamy. Polygamy is rare in church history,

but that's because the Catholic Church barely even approved of marriage.

So it's time to reconsider polygamy today. Monogamy *is* ideal, but who lives in an ideal world? Think of Christian women who long to marry but cannot find a mate because men are immature, immoral, or uninterested in marriage. If a man is able to support two wives, polygamy is better than a life of loneliness.¹

Sermons like that can keep people talking for a while. Is it enough to say that the pastor will have an answer when he returns? Shouldn't every believer be able to formulate a reply? After all, we often hear speakers claim to disclose "forgotten" truths. They can sound persuasive, even while they seem wrong. But we may feel lost, wondering, "Have I been wrong all this time, or is there something wrong here?" We should know how to test new teachings.

We wish we could handle Scripture more confidently when Bible teachers contradict each other, when our pastor preaches on a text we just read and his message soars far beyond anything we saw, or when we need to prepare a lesson and don't know where to begin. We fall short largely because we lack methods for Bible study.

Our Need for Training

At worst, popular Bible study consists of reading a passage and asking, "What does this say to me?" That is, "What thoughts or feelings does it stir in me?" Sadly, people can "find" almost any idea they like in a passage. They seize on a moral or theological snippet and ignore the rest. If we look closely, we notice that people tend to hear Scripture say trendy, self-serving things.

Yes, believers should expect to hear God's voice in Scripture, and yes, all believers are priests with access to God's Word (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 5:10). God is the ultimate teacher of all who know him (Jer. 31:33–34), and his anointing leads us into the truth (1 John 2:27). But we abuse these privileges if we let our impressions rule. Because we

1. The sermon captures reports from Bill Myers, missionary to Togo; Bishop Francis Ntiruka and Rev. Angolwisye Malumbugi, church leaders in Tanzania; and missiologist Adrian Hastings. They *describe* this view but do not *advocate* it.

believe that God has spoken, we need methods for discovering, as best we can, what the Bible originally meant and what it means now.

We need help because the Bible comes from distant ages. We speak English, Spanish, German, or Mandarin. They spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, or Latin. We live in a technological society, shaped by automobiles, phones, videos, and computer networks; they lived in an agrarian society shaped by donkeys, wooden plows, clay pots, and dirt roads. Today we are ruled by elected officials and power arises from economic forces. They were ruled by a Roman emperor and his armies.

As a result, we need training in biblical *language* and *customs*. As for language, we should know precisely what *justification*, *redemption*, and *propitiation* mean. Regarding customs, readers of the Gospels can see that, contrary to the habits of “religious” people in his day, Jesus associated with outcasts, sinners, and people of other ethnic groups. But readers miss Jesus’ violation of other customs. For example, in Western cultures, men and women converse freely in most settings, so we hardly notice that Jesus breaks with his culture’s norms by talking to a Samaritan woman in John 4 and by treating Mary and Martha as disciples and friends in Luke 10. Jewish rabbis believed that teaching women was a waste of time. One said, “It is better that the words of the Law should be burned, than that they should be given to a woman.”² Jesus disagreed.

We need to learn about contemporary Judaism to get the most from the Gospels. Indeed, the issue of cultural distance had already arisen by the time the New Testament was written. That is why Mark, Luke, and John, writing for Gentile audiences, explained Aramaic terms and Jewish customs that Gospel narratives mention. For example, Mark explained terms that came up during the crucifixion of Jesus (Mark 15:22, 34; cf. 5:41; 7:19; 9:6; 11:32; 15:16). John interprets even common Jewish terms such as *rabbi* and *Messiah* (John 1:38–42). So varying customs and words already impeded communication with people living a few hundred miles away, mere decades after Jesus’ life. How much more do we need instruction two thousand years later?

2. The Jerusalem Talmud, quoted in James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 72.

Training also helps us apply the Bible to new situations. For example, Christians who work with medical technology have to wrestle with issues such as artificial insemination and the use of heroic measures on the terminally ill. Everyone has to decide how to use entertainment media. In popular music, does vulgarity matter if we can't hear the words? At present, the news industry seems to dispense fear and outrage more than information; how does that inform our use of public media?

The Bible never *directly* addresses such questions. In a way, it cannot, since it speaks to all ages and cultures. If God had dictated instructions about computers or life-support systems to Ezekiel, they would have been incomprehensible. Thus, proof texts rarely answer questions that stem from new situations. "Thou shalt not kill" doesn't solve every ethical quandary that we encounter in hospitals. We need to search the whole Bible to find relevant principles; training helps the process. Accurate interpretation depends on sound methods. Yet valid interpretation also depends on mature interpreters. This book focuses on techniques for interpreting the Bible, but we must also comment on interpreters and their hearts.

The Interpreter

The mastery of methods does not guarantee that God will bless one's labors. At best, Bible study facilitates an encounter with the Lord, not just a book. When we join skillful methods to a receptive heart, we can expect Bible study to bear fruit. Teachers need to be receptive because the goal of interpretation is faith and practice.³ Psalm 119:1–4 blesses those who "walk in the law" and *keep* the Lord's precepts. James 4:17 agrees, saying that "whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." Paul tells us that Scripture should lead to righteousness: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly

3. Christian literature often says this; philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer agreed that we prove that we grasp writings by applying them to new situations. See *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 289–99.

equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17 NIV 1984). Teachers prove that they understand a concept when they apply it well to new situations. We demonstrate that we grasp the *idea* of “speaking the truth in love” when we express a difficult truth without needless bloodletting. By contrast, a man shouldn’t claim to understand biblical teachings on marriage if he drives his wife from their home, divorces her, and marries another woman.

Anyone can acquire techniques for interpretation. The principal methods apply to any document. Skeptics can understand the grammar and terminology of the Bible perfectly well. They can gain information, but unless they yield to God’s Word, they can read all day and profit nothing. Unless they humble themselves, they may reject God’s Word as they read it. They may seek natural explanations for supernatural events. Or they may doubt Gospel narratives until they establish a core of reliable facts. Alas, their facts may amount to very little: Jesus taught and healed, and Romans killed him.

The half-committed Christian occupies an awkward position, too. He weaves his way through the Bible like a child picking his way through the vegetables while dining with Aunt Alberta, not quite sure whether the goal is to eat or avoid eating. So much seems unpalatable: “This can’t mean what it appears to say. . . . Surely that no longer applies today,” he mutters whenever a teaching offends his tastes. The half-committed Christian has scant interest in Bible study, since he is not sure that he *wants* to know what it says.

The believer’s advantage over skeptics and waverers is that he or she takes the right posture toward Scripture. He does not view the apostles as his peers, as though he had the right to criticize whenever he wishes. She does not merely encounter it, expecting to meet new ideas. She *accepts its authority*, for she considers it the Word of the Lord she loves. *Our real advantage lies less in the work we do on the text than in the work God does in us.*⁴ A skeptic can discover what the Bible means; believers have no mystical advantage in

4. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:78–79 (1.7.4–5); Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 53–55.

grasping biblical grammar. But when God’s Spirit works in us, we receive the message, even if it stings. Skeptics may misconstrue the Bible for many reasons, but surely their unwillingness to believe counts most in the end.

Take prayer. The literature can emphasize methods of prayer: in the morning, in a secluded place, with confession and thanksgiving, not just petitions. This is good counsel, but it doesn’t reach the heart of the matter. One can take the right steps and have a poor prayer life. For this reason, whenever Jesus taught his disciples *what* to pray, he also taught them *how* to pray—with the right attitude (Matt. 6:5–15; Luke 11:1–13).

Knowledge without devotion bred spiritual pride in the Pharisees, and it can do so today. Let each reader ask: “What kind of reader am I? Am I committed to follow whatever I discover in the Bible, regardless of the cost?”

Three Forms of Heart Failure

Although the question “Are you committed?” invites a simple yes or no, there is more. Even if we give a provisional yes, we might still fail because of immaturity or spiritual insensitivity.

Immaturity hampers our grasp of biblical teachings. For example, if a child gives away her favorite stuffed bear, this doesn’t mean that she understands sacrificial giving, especially if she screams whenever her siblings dare even to *look* at her favorite foods. Similarly, the concept of church discipline boggles the minds of new converts because it contradicts popular ideas about grace and the “right” to govern our own lives. Unless we understand human sin and God’s holiness, church discipline makes little sense. Thus, immaturity hampers the ability to receive Scripture.

Insensitivity may stem from laziness or stubbornness more than from ignorance. For example, Jesus’ disciples misunderstood the predictions of his crucifixion because of their attachment to false ideas about the Messiah. Although Jesus often foretold his death, they never accepted it until afterward. When he predicted his crucifixion, they couldn’t hear it and were afraid to ask about it (Luke 9:45). Peter even *rebuked* Jesus for talking about his death (Matt.

16:13–23). Why? Because the disciples' concept of a suffering Messiah clashed with their hopes for a triumphant deliverer.

Even when a Bible message seems strange, we ought to accept it. Otherwise, we might ignore the passage or reinterpret it so that it fits our thinking more comfortably. During the period of the Crusades, European Christians believed that it was their obligation to halt Muslim expansion and avenge their cruelties toward Christian pilgrims in Jerusalem. There was essentially no Muslim evangelism for centuries. Christians knew that Jesus had told them to disciple the nations; they thought it didn't apply to Muslims, whom they considered subhuman and destined for destruction.⁵ So they let preconceptions nullify the biblical message.

Future Christians will surely shudder at our mistakes, too. Will they shake their heads at our consumerism? Our willingness to follow gifted but harsh and immoral leaders? The marketing of the church? Our casual acceptance of church divisions? There is no simple cure for spiritual blind spots, but it helps to study the Bible and follow wherever it leads.

When Cornelius greets Peter at his door in Acts 10, he manifests the spirit that leads to profitable hearing of the Word: "Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us" (Acts 10:33 NIV). Sadly, many listen to sermons, thinking, "I am here in the presence of mankind to hear everything that meets a felt need and confirms my opinions."

Rebellion, whether naive or deliberate, leads people to misread or distort Scripture. A woman awakens in a cold sweat one morning, decides that her marriage is a dirt road going nowhere, and starts looking for an exit. There is no infidelity, abuse, or desertion; she just wants to escape. She may proceed with divorce although the Bible forbids it. She clutches the phrase "God is love," thinking, "If God is love, he can't want me to endure this miserable marriage for years." Or suppose that a child embraces Buddhism or lives in an illicit relationship. Suddenly family members bend Scripture, so

5. Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A Short History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Thomas F. Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

that it tolerates different faiths or lifestyles. Before long, the art of twisting the Bible becomes sophisticated, like advanced origami. In the end, if the Bible doesn't agree with their views, so much the worse for the Bible! If anyone dismisses it whenever it challenges them, it slowly becomes a closed book.

Ultimately, the Spirit of God must remedy our immaturity, insensitivity, and rebellion. But the Spirit does use his Word to cure souls. For this reason, the church still needs skillful teachers. Good elders "labor in preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). Paul also calls Timothy "a worker" who rightly handles the Word (2 Tim. 2:15). That is God's call to many of us (Eph. 4:11). But before we can teach others, we must be teachable ourselves.

Why This Book?

Above all, this book is a primer in Bible interpretation that emphasizes application. It's written for anyone who wants to move from casual, impressionistic dabbling to reading that begins with exegesis, and then goes on to biblical theology and careful application. No one objects to devotional reading of Scripture, but the kingdom needs leaders with skill in interpreting and teaching God's Word.

As a primer, this book uses a simple guide for interpretation. Many books scatter the basic principles for interpretation through chapters that survey the genres of Scripture: its laws, poetry, prophecies, and letters.⁶ This book presents the steps of interpretation in the order in which one actually uses them. It summarizes the principles in the acronym CAPTOR:

C = Context

A = Analysis

P = Problems

T = Themes

O = Obligations

R = Reflection

6. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with explaining interpretation genre by genre, but beginners need a method that will work for every genre.

There are two aspects of *context* (chapters 3–4). The literary context of a passage is the text before and after it. The historical context is the culture and material circumstances when the passage was written. In *analysis*, we study the flow of events in a story or the flow of ideas in a teaching (chapters 5–6). *Problems* are the words, customs, phrases, or names that we may not understand (chapter 7). *Themes* are the major ideas of a passage, ideas that run through the Bible (chapter 8). *Obligations* are whatever the passage requires of readers (chapters 9–11). In *reflection*, we attempt to discover the main point and application of our passage (chapters 12–13). Furthermore, in reflection we consider how a passage presents Jesus and his redemption. Using these six concepts, anyone who is willing to read carefully, think hard, and follow a method can interpret the Bible with substantial accuracy, even with limited formal education.

As primers go, this book emphasizes application. Too many books assume that application takes care of itself if we just listen to the Holy Spirit and speak honestly to the troubles we see—in ourselves and others. But it's not as simple to find the obligations that a passage lays on readers, and methods help there.

This book also has exercises. We master skills through practice. If we want to learn to fix plumbing, to cook, or to play golf, books help, but genuine progress begins when we have equipment in our hands and a project before us. Remember how you learned to ride a bicycle: not through your father's instructions, but by climbing up and falling down again and again until you mastered it. Likewise, we learn to cook omelets by overheating the pan and scorching the eggs, by adding too much cheese, and by making adjustments until we get it right. Perhaps you like recipe books, but reading can't compare to cooking and eating. Exercises appear at the end of each chapter to foster growth.

Conclusion

This chapter has described the conditions that foster good interpretation. First, one must believe in, or at least be open to, the God of the Bible and the idea that he revealed himself to humanity in Scripture. Second, one must desire to engage the Lord who speaks.

I assume that most readers are or will be teachers who prepare studies to share with others. I hope you are also reading with a desire to know the living Lord, to follow him, and to help others in the same journey. I pray that this work will help you become a worker who finds treasures in the Bible and shares them widely.

A Note on Critical Theories

A comment is necessary for readers who have spent time with literary theory and philosophical hermeneutics in university settings. Liberals and conservatives, Protestants and Catholics, faithful Bible professors and agnostic literature professors generally agree that valid interpretation depends on the skills described in the following chapters. But a caveat is necessary. For decades, skeptical philosophers, literary analysts, and social critics have promoted theories of reading and knowledge that undermine the project of interpretation. They deny that interpreters can recover the thoughts of an author or the meaning of a text. Driven by deconstruction and one version of reader-response theory, they doubt that authors can produce a text with a stable, objective meaning that skilled readers can grasp. In their view, texts are shot up with gaps, inconsistencies, tensions, internal contradictions, and sentences of uncertain meaning. Besides, authors are creatures of their time more than they know, so they cannot understand or escape their culture. Beyond that, once authors release their texts by publishing them, they “die” in one sense. Specifically, nothing can stop readers from playing with texts and finding ideas that the author never “authorized.” Whatever the reason, radical literary theory says that readers don’t “find” the meanings that authors intend; they “construct” them. Friedrich Nietzsche may have initiated this approach, since he held that the death of God requires humanity to impose meaning and order on a disorderly world: “Ultimately, man finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into them.” In this view, readers don’t *find* meaning; they import or create it.⁷

7. Quoted in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 18–21.

Since the days of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, the “hermeneutic of suspicion” has proposed that speeches and writings should never be taken at face value, since anyone who has authority seeks to retain or expand his power. Critical theory says that whether they know it or not, powerful people always support the systems that privilege them and suppress others. (Predictably, critical theorists tend to be suspicious of every theory except their own.) Take colonialists, critical theorists say. Colonialists claimed a manifest or God-given destiny to control the new world, spreading democracy, faith, and civilization as they went. These powers saw the Americas as unclaimed territory. Or they perceived the inhabitants as savages who needed to be saved, educated, and tamed. In fact, these ideologies simply justified colonialists’ seizure of gold, silver, and land from indigenous people whom they even enslaved. Therefore, nothing they say can be taken at face value.⁸ Today the hermeneutic of suspicion is a mark of “critical” theories, which have taken various forms in recent years. At a theoretical level, critical theory includes postmodernism and Marxism. But critical studies tend to engage the world and to pursue social justice. This holds, at present, for feminist and gender theory, postcolonial theory, critical race theory, queer theory, “fat studies,” and more.⁹ All of these have the potential to influence Bible interpreters, and some have adopted deconstruction and damaging forms of reader-response theory. Kevin Vanhoozer’s work *Is There a Meaning in This*

8. This theory neglects key facts. For one thing, certain Europeans openly admitted their ambitions. At one point, Francisco Pizarro said that he had no interest in missions: “I have not come for any such reasons; I have come to take away from them their gold.” Meanwhile, men such as Antonio de Montesinos evangelized and defended indigenous Americans and excoriated Spaniards for their sins against them. See Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1990), 143–46.

9. “Fat studies” are sometimes treated as a joke. Like any other movement that accents the deconstruction of mainstream wisdom, or stresses victimhood and privilege (in this case “thin privilege”), fat studies are open to critical analysis. But fat-studies authors earnestly seek social justice. See Linda Bacon, *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth about Your Weight* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2010). See the site of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, <https://naafa.org>. The author is sometimes cited as “Linda Bacon,” but also often as “Lindo” because of her possibly reversed decision to change her name. Some say “Lindo/a Bacon.”

Text? is an excellent Christian analysis of the intellectual issues. Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay's secular analysis *Cynical Theories* explores the practical consequences of a hermeneutic of suspicion and of critical theories.¹⁰ Above all, the hermeneutic of suspicion and related critical theories assert that it is naive to take any message, including Scripture, at face value. While very few churches teach these views openly, universities do advocate them, and many include the Bible in their list of texts that oppress and subjugate the weak and justify existing power structures. Church leaders should know that educated church people might have sympathy for these views. So we may want to address those who are skeptical about the value of Bible study. Teachers should point out that the prophets and apostles are more likely to criticize and subvert existing power structures than to promote them.

10. Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020).