

Introduction: A Journey of Discovery and Encounter

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

**Fig. 0.1. Trail Guide
Basic Overview**

The Interpretive Task



Ten Reasons That the Old Testament Is Important for Christians



The Benefits of Hebrew Exegesis



Overview of the Interpretive Process: T.O.C.M.A.



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

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was also certain that the Old Testament bore witness about him (Luke 24:27, 46; John 5:39, 46), that it would be completely fulfilled (Matt. 5:17–18; Luke 24:44), and that it called for repentance and forgiveness of sins to be proclaimed in his name to all nations (Luke 24:47). I love the Old Testament because of the way it portrays God’s character and actions and serves as a witness to the majesty of our Messiah. The Old Testament is the initial three-fourths of God’s special revelation to us, and I want you to interpret the Old Testament rightly because there is no higher need for mankind than to see and celebrate the Sovereign, Savior, and Satisfier disclosed in its pages.

The Interpretive Task



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

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

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

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

4. For more on this, see Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 30–38; Stein, “The Benefits of an Author-Oriented Approach to Hermeneutics,”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JETS 44, 3 (2001): 451–66; G. K. Beale, “The Cognitive Peripheral Vision of the Biblical Authors,” *WTJ* 76, 2 (2014): 263–93, esp. 266–70; cf. G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden but Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Divine Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 340–64, esp. 344–47.

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

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

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

3. Biblical interpretation requires that we respond appropriately.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ten Reasons That the Old Testament Is Important for Christians



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. We meet the same God in both Testaments.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The last of my ten reasons why the Old Testament still matters for Christians builds on the fact that Paul was referring to the Old Testament when he spoke of the “sacred writings” that are able to make a person “wise for salvation” and the “Scripture” that is “breathed out by God and profitable” (2 Tim. 3:15–16). Knowing this colors our

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

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

The Benefits of Hebrew Exegesis



You do not have to know Hebrew to profit much from this book. Indeed, every chapter contains solid information for guiding English-only Old Testament interpretation. Nevertheless, God gave us most of the Old Testament in Hebrew, and because of this a lot of material in the first half of the book (chs. 1, 3–7) clarifies the process of *Hebrew* exegesis. If you do not know Hebrew, I encourage you to keep reading this section, for I believe that it can move you to appreciate and pray for those who do. If you are not interested in hearing some of the benefits of Hebrew exegesis, feel free to jump ahead to the next section.

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

STUDY

DO

TEACH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Overview of the Interpretive Process: T.O.C.M.A.



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

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

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

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

Part 2: OBSERVATION—How is the passage communicated?

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

Part 3: CONTEXT—Where does the passage fit?

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

Part 4: MEANING—What does this passage mean?

10. **Biblical theology:** Consider how all the Bible fits together and points to Christ.
11. **Systematic theology:** Discern how your passage theologically coheres with the whole Bible, assessing key doctrines especially in direct relation to the gospel.

Part 5: APPLICATION—Why does this passage matter?

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

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

Key Words and Concepts

Biblical interpretation

Exegesis

Theology

Special revelation

Infallible and inerrant

I.O.U.S.

Whole counsel of God

Study → do → teach!

T.O.C.M.A.

Questions for Further Reflection

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

Resources for Further Study¹³

Baker, David W., and Bill T. Arnold. *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.

Carson, D. A. "Approaching the Bible." In *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, edited by D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, and G. J. Wenham, 1–19. 4th ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994.

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

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