

40 QUESTIONS ABOUT
Interpreting the Bible

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 **Kregel**
Academic & Professional

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Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., P.O. Box 2607, Grand Rapids, MI 49501.

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ISBN 978-0-8254-3498-3

Printed in the United States of America

10 11 12 13 14 / 5 4 3 2 1

QUESTION 39

What Is the “Theological Interpretation of Scripture”?

Biblical scholars gather once a year at the annual professional meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. At the November 2008 meeting in Boston, some of the liveliest sessions focused on the “theological interpretation of Scripture” (TIS). Indeed, the recent publication of many titles related to TIS demonstrates that the fascination with this hermeneutical approach is only beginning.¹ At the same time, TIS is so new that even many Christian scholars have no clear sense of what it is. In a sentence, TIS is an academic movement that seeks to return reflection on the biblical text to the purview of the confessing Christian church. Below, we will survey the terminology, history, and characteristics of the theological interpretation of Scripture movement.

Terminology

At present, a number of interchangeable terms are used to identify a TIS approach to the Bible.

1. Theological interpretation of Scripture
2. Theological interpretation of the Bible
3. Theological interpretation
4. Theological hermeneutics
5. Theological commentary on the Bible
6. Theological exegesis

1. The Baker Academic Web site lists twenty-one books under the category of “theological interpretation.” Included are a number of commentaries in the new Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series (www.bakeracademic.com [accessed December 13, 2008]). Baker appears to be the leading evangelical publisher in the area of theological interpretation.

Additionally, some recent works fit within the TIS framework but do not identify themselves explicitly with the terms listed above.²

History of the Theological Interpretation of Scripture Movement

As is clear from recent TIS authors’ struggles to describe their movement, the theological interpretation of Scripture is still emerging as a defined approach to the Bible.³ It is difficult to find a monograph before 2005 that uses the identifier “theological interpretation” in the technical sense that it has quickly acquired.⁴ At the same time, advocates of theological interpretation do not see themselves as proposing something new but as returning to the church-based, transformative study of the Bible that characterized generations of Christians before the Enlightenment.⁵

Daniel J. Treier traces the interests of TIS authors to precursors in Karl Barth and the Yale School (a movement in literary criticism birthed at Yale).⁶ Other more recent pioneers (from the 1990s) include Francis Watson, Stephen Fowl, and Kevin Vanhoozer.⁷

Indeed, as the movement has coalesced so recently, it is difficult to gain a balanced historical perspective on its origins. It seems, however, that a number of scholarly trends have intersected and combined, resulting in a new movement that only recently has found enough unity to consistently describe itself with its own moniker (i.e., TIS). The trends leading to TIS include: disillusionment with the historical-critical method and far-fetched ideologically driven interpretations (e.g., homosexual readings of Scripture), a desire for theological continuity with the pre-Enlightenment church, a growing acceptance in the academy of interpretive movements that bracket out skepticism and critical questions (e.g., reader-response approach,⁸ canonical criticism, canonical process approach, narrative or literary criticism,

2. E.g., N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

3. See Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker; London: SPCK, 2005), 19–25.

4. But see Stephen E. Fowl, ed., *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997).

5. Note the subtitle of Treier’s book—*Recovering a Christian Practice*.

6. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 17–19.

7. *Ibid.*, 11.

8. Interestingly, Erik M. Heen describes TIS as a kind of reader-response approach. He writes, “The ‘Theological Interpretation of Scripture’ has emerged as a new discipline within biblical studies. In this approach to the Bible the ‘social location’ of the contemporary interpreter is taken seriously. ‘Theological Interpretation’ can, therefore, be understood as kind of ‘Reader-Response’ criticism. In Theological Interpretation the primary interpretive community of readers is not understood to be a subset of the academy, as is assumed in many varieties of Reader Response Criticism; rather, the interpretive body is made up of those who self-identify as members of church communities. Theological Interpretation seeks then to bring together newer methods of biblical studies with confessionally based

reception history, effective history, etc.). For further descriptions of these precursors to TIS, see question 40 (“What are some other recent trends in biblical interpretation?”).

Characteristics of the Theological Interpretation of Scripture Movement

“Can you tell me in one sentence what the theological interpretation of Scripture is?” Thus queried a colleague of mine at a recent gathering. Indeed, as the TIS movement is still developing, it is difficult to briefly define without being reductionistic. Below, I shall list some dominant characteristics and accompanying assessments of the TIS movement.

1. Practitioners of TIS generally are disillusioned with the historical-critical method, biblical theology, principles of interpretation, and ideologically driven interpretation as ends in themselves. It is important to note that TIS is in many ways a rejection of the status quo. To recent scholarly work on the Bible, TIS advocates would give two assessments: “Not enough” (by leaving theology in the cerebral realm) and “not faithful to the nature of Scripture and our identity as Christians” (by not reading as followers of Jesus who encounter God in the words of the Bible). Those advocating TIS are not advocating the complete neglect of historical criticism or other interpretive methods. But these methods in themselves (and what they have produced) are not enough.

TIS authors especially dislike the idea that hermeneutics is a process of learning interpretive methods, applying those methods, and arriving at a propositional statement of authorial meaning. Such a hermeneutical model, it is argued, eviscerates and objectifies the text. The interpreter approaches the text as master rather than as servant.⁹ Scripture becomes an ancient word to others rather than God’s living Word to us today. While I certainly am sympathetic to criticisms of any method that would reduce hermeneutics to a cold semantic equation, it is equally true that many of the church fathers (generally revered by TIS) enumerate interpretive methods similar to the ones used in standard hermeneutics textbooks today.¹⁰

theological reflection in ways that historical-criticism did not always encourage” (“The Theological Interpretation of the Bible,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 21, no. 4 [2007]: 373).

9. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Imprisoned or Free? Text, Status, and Theological Interpretation in the Master/Slave Discourse of Philemon,” in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, ed. A. K. M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 92.
10. See, for example, the interpretive rules of Augustine in Book 2 of *De Doctrina Christiana* (NPNF1 2:535–55). Of course, in addition to standard interpretive principles, Augustine

Practitioners of TIS emphasize confessing Christians as participants and the audience of interpretation. According to TIS, interpretation must take place in the church and for the church. Some TIS authors are liberal Protestants, others are Roman Catholics, and others are evangelicals. But all desire to remain self-consciously ecclesiastical in confession and concerns.

At its best, this bold call for a believing interpreter and audience demonstrates that TIS authors are “not ashamed of the gospel” (Rom. 1:16). At its worst, writing in and for the church can be a capitulation to the secular world’s demands that religious faith remain subjective. That is, in embracing the church context as the *only* legitimate realm for theological reflection, Christians become just another reading community rather than those who believe the truth they hold is for all people.

2. Practitioners of TIS respect external theological parameters as guides for interpretation. If one writes in and for the church, it is legitimate to be bound by ecclesiastical confessions, argue TIS authors. That is, one can unashamedly appeal to the “rule of faith” (early Christian summary of fundamental beliefs), creeds, confessions, and the contours of the Christian canon. TIS authors point to the early church’s use of the “rule of faith” as one of its main interpretive principles.¹¹

Admittedly, most interpretations of Scripture are influenced by prior theological commitments, whether formalized in a creed or not. Yet, ultimately, Scripture demands an authority above any doctrinal précis. We do not want to lose what our forefathers in the faith fought for in the Reformation. As Luther courageously declared in his defense at the Diet [Assembly] of Worms (1521),

endorses a reverent, church-based, confessionally informed approach—the very desire of TIS practitioners.

11. Treier’s description of the new Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series illustrates the TIS commitment to doctrinal parameters: “The series ‘presupposes that the doctrinal tradition of the church can serve as a living and reliable basis for exegesis.’ This tradition, more specifically, is that doctrine surrounding the Nicene Creed. The series promotes ‘intratextual analysis’ as its key ‘method,’ along with drawing upon ‘the liturgical practices and spiritual disciplines of the church as a secondary dimension of the canonical context for exegesis of scriptural texts.’ Such an approach can lead to various senses of Scripture, including ‘allegorical’ readings, and requires that contributors engage the history of exegesis, not in order to provide readers with a summary of past interpretation, but in order to shape exegetical judgments in conversation with the tradition’” (*Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 40). The quotations within Treier’s remarks are from a Brazos document describing the purpose of the series to contributors.

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.¹²

3. Practitioners of TIS appreciate the narrative story line of Scripture. Scripture is approached not primarily as a set of propositions but as the story of the living God and his saving revelation of himself to wayward humans.¹³ The language of drama is seen as a powerful metaphor for God’s story in Scripture and the ongoing participation of Christians today in God’s work in the world.¹⁴
4. Practitioners of TIS respect the way the Bible has been interpreted by previous generations of Christians. In fact, another scholarly trend that led directly into the TIS movement is the recent scholarly fascination with ancient church beliefs, writings, and practices.¹⁵ While we can learn much from the early church, some TIS authors are too uncritical in their praise and appropriation of ancient and medieval church interpreters.¹⁶ Martin Luther, on the other hand, judged Origen’s exegesis as

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12. W.A. 7:838. English translation by Roger A. Hornsby, “Luther at the Diet of Worms,” in *Career of the Reformer II*, ed. George W. Forell, in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958), 32:112–13.
 13. Vanhoozer writes, “We [as practitioners of TIS] do affirm the ecumenical consensus of the church down through the ages and across confessional lines that the Bible should be read as a unity and as *narrative testimony* to the identities and actions of God and of Jesus Christ” (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Introduction: What Is the Theological Interpretation of the Bible,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Baker; London: SPCK, 2005], 19 [my emphasis]).
 14. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).
 15. E.g., Brian D. McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008); *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture Series* (IVP); and *The Church’s Bible* (Eerdmans).
 16. E.g., David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 26–38; Stephen E. Fowl, “The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense of Scripture: The Example of Thomas Aquinas,” in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, ed. A. K. M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 35–50; and R. R. Reno, “‘You Who Were Far Off Have Been Brought Near’: Reflections on Theological Exegesis,” *Ex Auditu* 16 (2000): 169–82.

“altogether useless.”¹⁷ Luther could make such a statement because of his commitment to the Bible’s authority and clarity (as distinguished from Origen’s allegorical flights of fancy, which added meaning unintended by the biblical authors).

5. Practitioners of TIS show an interest in the way the Bible has affected culture, art, politics, science, and other fields of knowledge. Technically, this subset of TIS is termed the study of a text’s “effective history.” Obviously, this sort of cross-disciplinary approach makes for interesting reading and allows readers to intersect the message of Scripture in ways quite foreign to traditional biblical studies. As TIS calls for the return of the Bible to the church (and the church is composed of much more than professional scholars), it is appropriate to ask how the Bible affects all of God’s people and their lives.
6. Practitioners of TIS desire that the study of the Bible be transformative of the individual and the individual’s faith community. Tying in with a growing interest in biblical spirituality, TIS authors advocate spiritually transformative study. Scripture cannot simply be viewed as a historical puzzle to be solved but as a word from God to his people.¹⁸

Projections

A colleague of mine recently noted that many people are writing books *about* the theological interpretation of Scripture, but very few are actually engaging in theological interpretation.¹⁹ Of course, this situation is beginning to change with the new Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series and other forthcoming books. Still, it is difficult to evaluate the TIS movement until more of its interpretive fruit is available for sampling.

It is perhaps foolhardy to offer projections about how the TIS movement will develop, but I will offer some tentative projections. Initial euphoria over this new middle ground in biblical scholarship will likely give way to splintering. The issue of ultimate authority (Scripture? tradition? human reason?) will cause liberal Protestants, evangelicals, and Roman Catholics to part ways. Evangelicals will likely face division among themselves—some

17. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1–5*, in *Luther’s Works*, ed. J. Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1958), 1:233. Luther writes, “It is the historical sense alone which supplies the true and sound doctrine” (*ibid.*).

18. Joel B. Green favors “interpretive practices oriented toward shaping and nurturing the faith and life of God’s people” (*Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2007], 79).

19. A comment by Jonathan Pennington. He is currently working on a book that seeks to apply concretely the TIS approach to the Gospels.

enamored with the broader academy’s praise of TIS at the expense of biblical faithfulness.

A generational divide also will likely characterize evangelicals. Some younger evangelicals who embrace TIS will denigrate the work of their exegetical forefathers. Older evangelicals will misunderstand and dismiss the new movement, uncritically lumping it together with other recent trends (the emergent church, postmodern theology, post-conservative theology).

In spite of some dour expectations, I genuinely hope that my fears are unfounded and that the better aspects of the movement (especially the call for reverent submission to Scripture) influence evangelical colleges, seminaries, and churches for years to come.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Before reading the material above, had you ever heard of the theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS) movement?
2. What aspects of the TIS movement do you find most promising?
3. Do any characteristics of the TIS movement concern you?
4. Have you noticed any characteristics of the TIS movement in recent books you have read or speakers you have heard?
5. A few projections for the future of the TIS movement were made above. Which of these projections seem most likely to you?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

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