Evangelicals, Theology, and Biblical Interpretation: Reflections on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture

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Theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS) has become very popular in recent years among both biblical scholars and theologians. But this popularity has polarized biblical studies, as some biblical scholars have strongly rejected TIS while others have hailed it as the savior of the moribund historical-critical method. Beyond these contrary assessments of TIS, another key problem in understanding TIS is the diverse (and sometimes contradictory) methods employed by TIS interpreters. This article will study the positive and negative aspects of TIS from the perspective of Evangelical biblical scholarship and propose a spectrum of styles of exegesis showing the range of methodologies in TIS and how they relate with other types of exegesis.

Key Words: theological interpretation of Scriptures, theological commentary, hermeneutics, precritical exegesis, historical criticism, unity of the Bible, diversity of the Bible, presuppositions in interpretation

The theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS) has been gaining popularity recently, giving rise to a variety of articles, books, and commentaries. But TIS has brought as many questions as answers. What is it? How does one interpret the Bible theologically? How does TIS relate to historical criticism? Reading TIS publications quickly reveals that many people are using the TIS label but using it in entirely different ways. And not only is there a plethora of approaches calling themselves TIS, but few seem to be bothered by the diversity. Moreover, Evangelical biblical scholars on the whole have not engaged and responded to TIS and its varying forms.

The thesis of this article is that the rise of TIS should be welcomed by Evangelical biblical scholars, although not every aspect of TIS will be helpful to them. TIS interpreters and Evangelical biblical scholars can have a fruitful reciprocal relationship. The desire of TIS to remind exegetes of the importance of theology is a welcome challenge for Evangelical biblical scholars to reconsider how to integrate theology with exegesis. On the
other hand, Evangelical biblical scholars can encourage TIS interpreters not to overrun the Bible with theology. After a short history of TIS, this article will present the beneficial aspects of TIS for Evangelical biblical scholars, discuss a few potentially unbalanced directions taken by some TIS interpreters, and propose a spectrum showing the range of methodologies in TIS and how they relate with other types of exegesis.

**SHORT HISTORY OF TIS**

Though TIS is very old, its recent incarnation arose in a very specific context. Since the Enlightenment, theology has been banned from exegesis, or at least relegated to the back seat. “Ideal exegesis” became the scientific study of a passage with no interference from dogmatics, which would prejudice the interpreter against the true meaning of the text. Theology could only be done after the text was thoroughly studied (and dissected). Since this historical study never seemed to end, theology was often put off until the next generation. Over the past few decades, many interpreters have reacted against the purely historical idea of exegesis and moved on to study the Bible using other means. Striving to return the Bible to the church from the academy and to connect the Bible to theology once again, TIS is one of those reactions against the dominant historical-critical method. Thus far, the direct influence of TIS has been limited to the academy, but its influence will most likely spread outside that arena in the future.

The relationship between TIS and Evangelicals is somewhat ambivalent. John Barton claims that, in times past, opponents of biblical criticism were automatically considered to be fundamentalists, but this identification cannot be assumed now. In a sense, Evangelicals as a whole are

2. Naturally, not all agree that the present division between exegesis and theology is a problem. For example, see the spirited defense of biblical criticism by John Barton, who believes that it is too theological already (John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007], 167–71).
4. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation*, 22. The discussion surrounding TIS also has been almost entirely restricted to English: all of the contributors to the *Journal of Theological Interpretation* are located in English-speaking countries, the entire bibliography in Treier’s *Introducing Theological Interpretation* is in English (with the exception of the work of Henri de Lubac), and all 11 essays in *Between Two Horizons* contain fewer than 10 non-English sources. While others have done work that is similar to TIS, they are not part of the TIS discussion up to this point (for example, see James D. G. Dunn et al., eds., *Auslegung der Bibel in orthodoxer und westlicher Perspektive* [WUNT 130; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000]).
5. The term *Evangelical* is used here in a relatively broad sense, following the “Larsen Pentagon,” especially the point about the importance of the Bible as “the divinely inspired, final authority in matters of faith and practice” (Timothy Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* [ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier; Cambridge Companions to Religion; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 1).
bystanders in the debate between the historical-critical method and TIS because the debate has largely been conducted in non-Evangelical circles, although Evangelicals are certainly not disinterested (and some Evangelical biblical scholars have identified themselves with TIS).\(^7\) TIS has reacted against a strict view of the historical-critical method and the study of the Bible as it is conducted in the university rather than the Evangelical seminary.\(^8\) Evangelicals have traditionally emphasized linking exegesis and theology, and many of the critiques of the historical-critical method from TIS have already been articulated by Evangelicals.

For the purposes of this article, TIS will be described by listing a series of its important principles. Not all TIS interpreters would subscribe to all these principles, and the sum of these principles does not equal TIS, but this listing is an introductory way to grasp the essence of TIS.

**HELPFUL PRINCIPLES OF TIS**

A number of aspects of TIS prove to be helpful reminders or correctives for Evangelical biblical scholarship in its current form.

*The Breakdown of Barriers between Biblical Studies and Theology*

One of the primary goals of TIS is to bring exegesis and theology back together again. Exegesis should not be simply an antiquarian interest in people who died a long time ago, which is the impression one can easily receive when reading critical commentaries. Instead, exegesis should have “a governing interest in God.”\(^9\) This point is also expressed in terms of bringing the Bible back from the academy to the church, its rightful keeper. However, this formulation introduces a second step in the process and complicates the matter further: theology and the church are not the same thing. Even if the exegesis does have serious interaction with theology, it does not necessarily follow that the church will benefit greatly. For example, Gerald Hiestand calls for a greater connection between theology itself and the church, not just biblical exegesis and the church (although that is part of it).\(^10\) While some TIS material is directly useful for the local church, other TIS material will be incomprehensible in that context.

\(^7\) Treier helpfully points out how Evangelicals have already been following various parts of TIS in *Introducing Theological Interpretation*, 21–25.

\(^8\) An example of this is the nine theses of the Scripture Project, which were intended to be a statement on which further discussion could be based. Among these theses was one on the truthfulness of the Gospels, which is clearly directed at the university and not the Evangelical seminary (The Scripture Project, “Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture* [ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 1–5).


A Higher View of Precritical Exegesis

TIS challenges Evangelicals to pay greater attention to pre-Enlightenment interpretation. This fits with the other beliefs of TIS, because many of the precritical interpreters operated under other TIS principles, such as the rule of faith. Paying attention to history involves more than surveying the literature over the past 200 years or even making a nod to Calvin. While precritical interpreters certainly have their problems, it would be beneficial for Evangelical commentaries to engage more of the history of interpretation.

The Views of Those outside North America and Europe

While this focus has not received as much attention as others, it fits with the TIS desire for multiple perspectives. It holds that it is good for Evangelicals to interact with those who are not from their own cultural context to learn how others are reading the Bible, in order to see the blind spots in their own thinking.

The Community

The rejection of “lone ranger” exegesis in favor of community exegesis is an important aspect for many in TIS. TIS sees one of its main goals to be giving the Bible back to the church, a goal with which Evangelicals should be in hearty agreement. Scholars need to read the Bible not only alone in their studies but also with others in the academy and others in the church, because interpreting the Bible is more than a scientific method. Reading in community helps to prevent us from misreading the Bible and importing too much of our own perspective into the text.

12. For example, precritical interpreters sometimes failed in not taking the text seriously in its historical setting and in not integrating the text into OT or NT biblical theology (Vanhoozer, “Introduction,” 16).
13. For an example of this engagement with the ancient church, see Ronald E. Heine, Reading the Old Testament with the Ancient Church: Exploring the Formation of Early Christian Thought (Evangelical Ressourcement; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).
A final helpful principle of TIS is the critique of the reader: the readers place themselves under the text and are critiqued by the text.\textsuperscript{17} The reader approaches the Bible not to control the text, but to be taught and challenged by it.

**HELPFUL BUT POSSIBLY PROBLEMATIC PRINCIPLES OF TIS**

**The Embracing of Theological Lenses and the Rule of Faith**

One of the most important ways TIS seeks to bring together theology and exegesis is to bring theology to bear on the text. Instead of recognizing our theological lenses and then seeking to overcome them, TIS wants readers to embrace those theological lenses when reading the Bible. The clearest example of this is the desire to return to “the rule of faith” in interpretation. The content of the rule of faith is unclear, although most agree that it should at least be the general orthodoxy handed down by the early church (such as the Nicene Creed). Vanhoozer believes that TIS “is not an imposition of a theological system or confessional grid onto the biblical text,”\textsuperscript{18} but others argue for approaching the text with the theology of one’s own tradition.\textsuperscript{19}

The rule of faith serves two functions. First, it is a fence for interpretation: if an interpretation falls outside the rule of faith, then it cannot be accepted. Second, and more obliquely, it serves as a guide or a key to exegesis: it actively helps us to understand the text in a better and fuller way.\textsuperscript{20} While the first function is potentially revolutionary for scholars in a university setting,\textsuperscript{21} most Evangelicals will happily accept it (if the rule of faith is restricted to the general orthodoxy of the church). But its usefulness is limited because Evangelical statements of faith already incorporate the rule of faith.

But the rule of faith as a guide or a key is more difficult to understand. Presuppositions have been viewed as baggage that we need to discard;

\textsuperscript{17} Ellen F. Davis, “Teaching the Bible Confessionally in the Church,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture* (ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 16–18.

\textsuperscript{18} Vanhoozer, “Introduction,” 16.


\textsuperscript{21} For example, one reviewer of Jaroslav Pelikan’s *Acts* thinks that Pelikan is being hyper literal when he follows the editor’s directive to write a commentary in accordance with the creeds, but this is exactly what TIS wants (David W. Congdon, “Review of Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts,* *Princeton Theological Review* 14 [2008]: 131–33).
Daniel Treier turns this metaphor around and says that baggage contains what is essential to carry with us. Therefore, at times that baggage is helpful in interpretation, though we must be open to correction by the text at the same time. Treier suggests that we begin the interpretive process by using “our theological understanding of the scope of the Bible’s teaching.”

“[D]octrine shapes both the questions we ask of biblical texts and the ways we communicate our answers,” but, at least for Treier, the Bible is still ultimately authoritative: “The movement of theological reflection is multidirectional, even if in a sense the line of authority moves in one direction, from the Bible to contemporary theology.” However, others go further and say that theology also gives the answers.

To clarify this idea, TIS can be compared to other approaches to Scripture that incorporate outside ideas as heuristic models. For example, postcolonialism might help the reader to see the conquest of Canaan from a new perspective. In the same way, TIS takes theology as a heuristic model and then tries to understand the text better based on that theology.

A good example of this is found in an essay by Robin Parry on Lamentations. Because Lamentations does not know the NT, the canonical Christian reading will be unexpected because the ideal reader reads the way expected by the text. But it is not arbitrary: the Christian theological reading must have an organic relationship with the expected reading. The primary key for a Christian reading of Lamentations is Isa 40–55 (postexilic in his opinion, hence after Lamentations). Second Isaiah takes Lamentations and injects hope into the book, particularly through the connection of the man of Lam 3 and the suffering servant of Isa 53. From there it is only a short step to the NT and Jesus: Lamentations is the equivalent of Saturday in the Passion Week. Bringing in the rule of faith, Parry wonders how the Trinity plays a role in Lamentations. The presence of Yahweh and Jesus in Lamentations were already studied in the article, but how does the Spirit fit in? Parry finds the connection in Rom 8:17, where the Spirit groans with the church and creation. The Spirit thus groans with those who are suffering in Lamentations.

While the idea of bringing theology to the text should challenge Evangelicals to think through their methodology, it can also cause problems: if

24. Treier, Introducing Theological Interpretation, 70.
25. Ibid., 198.
26. “Theology not only provides the rules for the correct interpretation of Scriptures, but also identifies their correct meaning” (Jorge J. E. Gracia, “Meaning,” in Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible [ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 499).
we bring our theology to the text, it will be difficult to correct this theology. How can our theology receive any kind of correction if our reading of Scripture already inherently contains our theology? We will simply find what we are looking for. Three ways to circumvent this danger have been suggested. One way is community: we should first read the text with our own theological lenses, but then we should gather around a table with those who have different theological lenses. A significant problem with this idea is pragmatic: it takes extensive time and effort to interact with those outside our community. Further, how do we know when other readers are being influenced by their sin and not we?

Another defense is a form of a hermeneutical spiral: we begin with our theological lenses, reach an interpretive conclusion, and then start the whole process over again. But if readers actively embrace their tradition at the beginning of the process, they will become dizzy on the spiral before being able to correct an error. Instead of asking “Does my theology fit?” when reading the text, TIS often asks “What can theology teach me about this passage?” The first question is much more open to correction than the second. The second question is valid and essential, but it should be asked after the first question, not before it.

A third approach combines those two questions by combining historical and theological approaches. Al Wolters presents a form of this, which he calls “confessional criticism.” He divides exegesis into nine categories, from textual criticism at the bottom to confessional discernment at the top. Our first reading should be done from the bottom up, that is, like grammatical-historical criticism has taught us, keeping theology at the end. But our second reading should be from the top down: we use our confessions and redemptive history to challenge our first reading of the text. A pure historical-critical reading of the text is not guaranteed to give us the correct reading of the text: biblical scholars can (and do) read things into the text just as well as other readers. Sometimes these top-down considerations will change the first reading, and sometimes they will not, but we must be open to the possibility of the first reading being challenged. This sort of two-stage reading (bottom-up and then top-down) provides a


31. Wolters expands this idea beyond the bounds of TIS, because he wants us to challenge our first reading with not only theological truths but also facts such as new archaeological discoveries or research in sociology (Albert M. Wolters, “Confessional Criticism and the Night Visions of Zechariah,” in Renewing Biblical Interpretation [ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller; Scripture and Hermeneutics 1; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000], 90–122).
good model for Evangelical readers of the Bible who want to be honest with the text but who also do not want to ignore the contributions of theology.

The Unity of the Bible

In reaction to the fragmentation of the Bible by historical-critical views, one of the key characteristics of TIS is the focus on the unity of Bible. Because the entire Bible has been given by God, and God is the focus of interpretation, we can view the Bible as a coherent unity. A good example of this focus on the unity of the Bible can be found in the article by Robin Parry on Lamentations. The essay ends with a response to the expected complaint: Does this not rob Lamentations of its power? The voice of Yahweh was purposefully kept out of Lamentations; how can we now insert that voice and still consider it a legitimate reading of the book? He says that we must pay attention to both the canonical form (weeping) and the canonical context (hope). We must be sure not to move too quickly from Saturday to Sunday, but neither should we forget Sunday is coming.32

The complaint he raises is precisely the complaint many readers will raise: Lamentations no longer lives up to its name. While canonically we have hope, the places such as Lamentations where that hope is not expressed should be guarded (see Ps 88 for a similar phenomenon).33 The author of Lamentations purposely did not include any hope because he wanted to express the despair present at the time, which makes it a beautiful text for those in times of deep despair today. It affirms lamentation by those in despair. The various books of the Bible should not be leveled so as to make them all say the same thing; the diversity in them should be preserved to reflect the diversity we experience in life.34 When we strive to show how the Bible fits together, the danger is that differences between various parts of the Bible are flattened out and any messiness ignored. This is not to say that we should ignore unity: biblical scholars sometimes need the reminder that finding unity in the Bible is a praiseworthy goal. Lamentations does not offer the last word on grief. But neither should we be too quick to flatten the pieces that do not fit nicely into the big picture.

The Rejection of History

Another key principle of TIS is the downplaying of historical criticism, a trend not only among TIS interpreters but among others as well (such as


33. This is not to say that Parry’s conclusions (not jumping too quickly to Sunday from Saturday) are to be rejected, just his method of getting there: a better route would be to frame it as staying in Lamentations for an appropriate amount of time before moving on to Isaiah and the Resurrection (rather than importing that hope directly into Lamentations).

those focusing more on the literary qualities in the text). While the rejection of the excesses of historical criticism is needed, some TIS interpreters (like some literary interpreters) have gone so far as to ignore history altogether—that is, the historical context of the text. For example, Jaroslav Pelikan used the Western text in his commentary on Acts not because this was the original text but because that was the text used by the early church: the original text of Acts has become less important than the text used in the history of interpretation. The history of interpretation trumps the historical context. Another example is Ephraim Radner’s *Leviticus*, which repeatedly refers to Origen and Augustine but never refers to any ancient Near Eastern data. While levels of certainty are needed, the simple fact that some of the historical reconstructions and observations are fanciful does not render all of them invalid. Just as some theological truths can be held more strongly than others, so some historical reconstructions can be held more strongly than others. Even more importantly than these concerns, our Christian faith is tightly bound to history; disconnecting theology from history severs a vital artery (1 Cor 15:12–19). A love for theology should not blind the reader to the historical context of the text.

**A Proposed Spectrum of Exegesis**

Trying to define TIS is somewhat like eating ice cream with a fork: it is possible, but it is very slippery. The methodological diversity within TIS causes no end of grief to those trying to engage TIS. As a way to understand this diversity, a heuristic spectrum of exegetical approaches is proposed here as a way to understand the various approaches to TIS in relation to each other and to other methods of exegesis. The spectrum of exegetical approaches is built between two poles: history on the left and theology on the right. Each pole has certain characteristics that tend to be associated with it. The history pole tends to be associated with the prehistory of the

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35. For a similar concern, see Brent A. Strawn, “Docetism, Käsemann, and Christology: Can Historical Criticism Help Christological Orthodoxy (and Other Theology) After All?” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2 (2008): 161–80.

36. Radner ignores these data because he believes that the historical reconstruction of the Israelite cult obscures the text (Ephraim Radner, *Leviticus* [Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008], 18).

37. For example, the title of an article by Christopher Seitz promises a discussion of the canonical approach and TIS, but the article is actually a defense of the canonical approach; TIS appears only in the context of a call for greater clarity on its definition (Christopher Seitz, “The Canonical Approach and Theological Exegesis,” in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* [ed. Craig Bartholomew et al.; Scripture and Hermeneutics 7; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006], 58–110).

38. The idea for this spectrum was inspired by Markus Bockmuehl, who affirmed a desire to integrate theology with exegesis but expressed concern about being identified with a TIS movement (Markus Bockmuehl, “The Case against New England Clam Chowder and Other Questions about ‘Theological Interpretation’” [paper presented at the annual meeting of the SBL, Boston, 23 November 2008]). While the spectrum is similar in some ways to that proposed by Treier with biblical theology and TIS as the two poles, it was developed independently (Treier, “Biblical Theology,” 16–31).
text, the original meaning, and a descriptive focus. The theology pole tends to be associated with the history of interpretation, the final form of the text, and a normative focus. This spectrum deals only with exegesis itself, not activities based on that exegesis. Therefore, biblical theology, which is a second step built on the first step of exegesis, is not directly on the spectrum. Even though one pole is labeled theology, theologians are not automatically assigned to this area of the spectrum; one’s position on the spectrum is determined by his or her style of exegesis.

Naturally, this spectrum is overly simplistic and does not take into account other ideological readings of the text. In the broader picture, the history–theology spectrum is simply one of many spectrums whose left side is a pure historical-critical exegesis; the right side of these other spectrums could be any number of other forms of interpretation (feminist, literary, liberation, postcolonial, and so on). For example, some feminist interpreters find their feminism in the text (placing them further left on the history–feminism spectrum), while others simply read feminism into and against the text (placing them further right on the history–feminism spectrum). The placement of history on the left of all these spectrums is heuristic: the dominant model until recently has been the historical one. But other helpful spectrums could be made as well, such as a literary–theological spectrum.

The following paragraphs will describe four positions on the spectrum: the two poles as well as two intermediate positions. Examples of each position will be given, especially the more theological positions.

Theologically Opposed Exegesis

Starting on the left side, the first position is theologically opposed exegesis, of which the purest form is the mining of the OT for grammatical and lexical information. Slightly to the right of this is the history-of-religions genre, which discusses theology but only as a descriptive enterprise. The ideal commentary for this position does not include theology, but leaves it for the reader. This general position on the spectrum would be represented by scholars such as John Barton, James Barr, Heikki Räisänen, and Rainer
Albertz. The commentaries placed here on the spectrum would be those that focus on the grammar of the text (such as the Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible) and those that focus exclusively on language and historical background (such as the International Critical Commentary, the Anchor Bible commentaries, the JPS Torah Commentaries, and the commentaries by the Eastern Orthodox scholar Paul Nadim Tarazai).

Theologically Open Exegesis

The next position on the spectrum, still on the history side but closer to theology, is the theologically open position. These authors are open to normative theology, but only as the text leads them to that theology: the line is always one-directional from text to theology. Theology is to be bracketed out until the text is studied in detail, at which point theological implications can be presented. In broad terms, this is the general position on which biblical theology has been built: the text is read in its historical context and then the biblical theologian, as a second step, seeks to put together all the material. Generally speaking, Evangelical hermeneutics would also find its home here: biblical theology is a one-way bridge from the text to systematic theology. Commentaries in this category include the New International Commentary, the New American Commentary, Commentaire Évangélique de la Bible, and Interpretation.

From a Jewish perspective, M. H. Goshen-Gottstein's call for a Tanakh theology would fit in this category. He wants Jews to study theological topics and recognizes that they may be influenced by post-OT developments, but he desires that the main focus of the study be on the OT as it stands by itself. Sounding similar to traditional Evangelical hermeneutics, the Eastern Orthodox biblical scholar Theodore G. Stylianopoulos says that biblical study involves three moves: historical, evaluative, and applicatory. While these are not entirely separate, they do largely build on each other.


44. Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective (2 vols.; Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox, 1997), 1:187–238. He repeatedly praises Evangelicals throughout the book (particularly Gordon Fee) and claims that in some ways Evangelicals are more patristic than the Orthodox (1:228).
The Catholic scholar Raymond Brown defends both the historical-critical method and the infallible doctrines of the Catholic Church.

I do not look to the church to settle the issue of what an individual NT author meant (and in fact I think it has never done so). . . . I look to the church to tell me what a NT passage has eventually come to mean for my belief. I also look to the church to help resolve the doctrinal import of ambiguous NT evidence, and I think it has done this in the question of the perpetual virginity of Mary.45

While his interest in doctrine might appear to push him further to the right of the spectrum, the determination of doctrine as a second step (after exegesis) places him closest to the theologically open category. Benedict Thomas Viviano, another Roman Catholic scholar, argues for a limited sola scriptura for Catholics, downplaying the effect tradition has on interpreting Scripture.46

The use of the phrase “theological commentary” by some scholars in Germany seems to be close to this position. For example, Erich Zenger lays out his qualifications for a theological commentary on the OT: it must be fundamentally based on historical exegesis, it must not be dogmatic (that is, must recognize the many possible interpretations of the text), it must be based on the final form of the text, it must take into account the text as part of the Bible, it must avoid anti-Semitic undertones, and it must recognize that the OT forms the basis for both Christianity and Judaism.47

Many of these qualifications have been used in the Herders Theologischer Kommentar series. While some of these qualifications are similar to TIS, the greater focus on historical exegesis, the lack of direct mention of the Rule of Faith, and the greater involvement of Judaism distinguish the German theological commentary from TIS (especially noteworthy is the use of Jewish authors for some of the volumes).48

45. Raymond E. Brown, Biblical Exegesis and Church Doctrine (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 72. For views similar to Brown, see the work of Joseph Fitzmyer (The Interpretation of Scripture: In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method [New York: Paulist Press, 2008]). Giuseppe Segalla has also argued that church authority intervenes at the level of theological meaning derived from the text, but not at the level of historical-literal sense (Giuseppe Segalla, “Church Authority and Bible Interpretation: A Roman Catholic View,” in Auslegung der Bibel in orthodoxer und westlicher Perspektive [ed. James D. G. Dunn et al.; WUNT 130; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000], 55–72).


48. See also the work of Peter Stuhlmacher, who uses the term “theologische Schriftauslegung” (Peter Stuhlmacher, Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture:
Theologically Curious Exegesis

The third part of the spectrum, farther toward the theology pole, is the theologically curious position, or a moderate TIS position. Authors at this position are curious about questions theology brings to the text, although the answers are not determined by theology. But it is not just methodology that is different from a theologically open position: the overall level of theology being discussed also increases considerably.

While this position is closer to the theology pole, history is still important. For example, Markus Bockmuehl wants us to focus on the implied reader, which places us in a historical context as well as in a theological context; that is, the NT was written to a group of specific people (historical context), but because these people were believers, the theological context is intricately connected to the historical context.49 A more specific example of how this position works is the investigation into the question of the relationship of the Trinity to the OT by Walter Moberly. He does not want to read the Trinity into OT texts anachronistically, but he looks for organic connections between the OT and the Trinity. The Trinity leads him to recognize the importance of God-in-relationship in the OT: we never meet God in the OT except in relationship with people. This God-in-relationship in the OT becomes internalized in the NT, inasmuch as he becomes known as a relational being, not just with creatures but also with himself. In this way, the use of an NT doctrine can help us see an OT doctrine that we might otherwise miss.50

Based on hints in their writing, Daniel Treier and Kevin Vanhoozer would be near this part of the spectrum.51 The French Evangelical Henri Blocher pays close attention to grammatical issues in the text but spends an equal amount of time looking at the theological issues relating to the text.52 In the European context some scholars can be located here on the spectrum, although they do not use the term TIS. Jürgen Roloff thinks that one cannot ignore historical-critical interpretation but does not want the church to stop with this interpretation: interpretation is for the church and the church has some measure of authority over interpretation, intervening

51. Both are in the process of writing TIS commentaries, so their position on the spectrum will be clearer in the future. For now, see Treier, “Biblical Theology,” 16–31; and Vanhoozer, “Introduction,” 15–28.
when interpretation goes outside the bounds.53 While the other volumes in the series do not follow the same pattern, the Numbers volume in the French series Sources Bibliques divides up the comments on each text into four sections: literary study, historical study, theological study (biblical theological themes), and development of exegesis (history of interpretation).54

The *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, prepared by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, advocates a combination of the historical-critical method with Catholic pre-understandings and a high regard for the history of interpretation.55 The Catholic scholars Luke Timothy Johnson and William Kurz seek to move Catholic scholarship from the second generation (such as that represented by Raymond Brown and Joseph Fitzmyer) to the third generation, characterized by traits such as a greater appreciation for the church fathers, a higher respect for church tradition, less optimism for historical criticism, and an acceptance of both the literal reading and the figurative senses.56 While he did not use the term TIS, Gerhard Maier fit several of the criteria: he rejected the historical-critical method and advocated a historical-biblical method in which the history of interpretation and theology were important.57

Tamar Kamionkowski represents a position close to this in a Reconstructionist Jewish context (the questions are supplied by the scholar and modern times, but the data come from the Bible).58 The Eastern Orthodox scholar Elias Oikonomos advocates a combination of “westeuropäischen (katholischen und protestantischen) Exegese” with “der Exegese der Kirchenväter.”59 While patristic interpretation is important for Oikonomos, he does not think that interpreters can ignore developments in the world.

The classic commentaries of Karl Barth on Romans and Philippians are in this category. Barth sought to be more critical than the critical commentators by honoring the text but also discussing theology to a much higher

level than was being done in commentaries. While he is somewhat to the left of this position because of his continued high regard and extensive use of historical criticism, Ulrich Luz shows many of the characteristics of this positions, such as a high regard for the church fathers, an interest in theology, an openness to spiritual readings of the text, and a desire to read the Bible in community and in the church.

Finally, this position is also illustrated by the Two Horizons Commentary series (THC). The authors in this series are primarily biblical scholars. Each commentary is divided into two sections: exegesis and theology. The exegesis is usually a synchronic literary study of the text. The theology section is subdivided into three subsections: theological themes of the book (such as a theology of suffering in 1 Peter or the theology of the land in Genesis), the book in broader biblical theology (judgment in the rest of the canon or Psalms in biblical theology), and the book as constructive theology (dualism, freedom, and reading Scripture in Colossians and Philemon or science, mission, ecology, and feminist approaches in Genesis). This format keeps the distinction between exegesis and theology, which causes concern for TIS interpreters farther to the right on the spectrum.

Theologically Focused Exegesis

The fourth position, on the right of the spectrum, is theologically focused exegesis. In its purest form, this type of interpreter has little interest in the original meaning and historical context of the biblical text, but reads the text entirely in light of theology and the history of interpretation. In its most extreme form, this type of interpretation gives little attention to what is actually in the text. These interpreters often use the biblical text only as a superficial starting point in order to focus on their own theology. This category is the home not of all theologians but only those who use a


63. For the commentaries published to this point (except for Fowl’s *Philippians*), the average number of pages for each section is 180 for exegesis and 45 for each of the three theological sections, giving far more discussion to theology than most commentaries.


specific type of exegesis; most Evangelical theologians would be found in the second or third category, not the fourth.

Many volumes in the TIS commentary series, the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (BTCB), represent this position. The authors in BTCB are primarily theologians rather than biblical scholars and are given great flexibility to decide how to write their commentaries. The volumes do not separate theology and exegesis, but they incorporate theological reflections into their discussion of the text itself. A strong focus on the unity of the Bible and a high respect for precritical exegesis characterizes these volumes.

While his Jewish background makes his work look different from that found in BTCB, Michael Fishbane interprets the Bible in a similar way: Rabbinics operates for Fishbane in a way comparable to the use of the early church for TIS interpreters. Archimandrit Ianuarij Ivliev, an Eastern Orthodox scholar, focuses on the importance of liturgy, the connection with the early church, and interpretation by those who experience new life in Christ. The work of Henri de Lubac, which played an important role in restoring respectability to precritical interpretation, would also be in this category. De Lubac did not simply write a survey of precritical interpretation, but he argued for a contemporary use of spiritual exegesis. The emphasis of I. de la Potterie on the spiritual reading of the Bible is similar to that of de Lubac, as is the strong focus on the importance of tradition in relation to Scripture by Yves Congar. Karl Kardinal Lehmann favors a

66. At the time of writing this article, eight volumes have been published: Jaroslav Pelikan, Acts (BTCB; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); Stanley Hauerwas, Matthew (BTCB; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006); Peter J. Leithart, 1 and 2 Kings (BTCB; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006); Matthew Levering, Ezra and Nehemiah (BTCB; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007); Ephraim Radner, Leviticus (BTCB; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008); Risto Saarinen, The Pastoral Epistles with Philemon and Jude (BTCB; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008); Phillip Cary, Jonah (BTCB; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008); and Telford Work, Deuteronomy (BTCB; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009).

67. This is not consistent throughout the series, however: Saarinen's Pastoral Epistles is dripping with Greek and would be more appropriately placed in the middle of the spectrum.

68. Michael Fishbane, Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 46–107. The view of another Jewish scholar, Benjamin Sommer, does not fit well on the spectrum. On the one hand, he believes that religious thought is based not on Scripture but on tradition. But on the other hand, he also believes that Jews should fully participate in biblical criticism and the diversity thereby created. He combines the two by appealing to the strong focus on diversity within Jewish tradition (Benjamin D. Sommer, “Unity and Plurality in Jewish Canons: The Case of the Oral and Written Torahs,” in One Scripture or Many? Canon from Biblical, Theological, and Philosophical Perspectives [ed. Christine Helmer and Christof Landmesser; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 108–50).


simple reading of the text (although he does not reject entirely a historical critical reading), because the Bible is not just about God, but from God. Readers can know much about the text but still not understand the text if their eyes have not been open and they are not part of the church.\textsuperscript{72}

R. R. Reno, the editor of BTCB, is unhappy with the move many TIS interpreters make from the text to abstraction. As an example, while reading Song 4:2, he speculated what Augustine would say about it: “Indeed, like the shorn ewes, divine love is fertile and generative.” But when he read what Augustine actually said, he felt he was going in the wrong direction:

It gives me pleasure to contemplate holy men, when I see them as the teeth of the church tearing men away from their errors and transferring them to its body, breaking down their raveness by biting and chewing. And it is with the greatest of pleasure that I visualize the shorn ewes, their worldly burdens set aside like fleeces, ascending from the pool (baptism) and all giving birth to twins (the two commandments of love), with none of them failing to produce this holy fruit.\textsuperscript{73}

Instead of moving to abstraction (divine love, God’s power, and so on), Augustine used the very words of the biblical text in a concrete fashion. Likewise, Reno wants us to use the biblical idiom in a specific and concrete manner instead of thinking of theology as abstraction. Not content with simply learning from precritical method, it becomes determinative for many at this end of the spectrum (in spite of the frequent claim that TIS is not a method), while biblical criticism becomes a four-letter word, not to be mentioned in polite society.

**Evangelicals and TIS**

TIS has arisen in response to a true problem: excesses in the historical critical method. Its help in overcoming those excesses and in reminding scholars of the importance of theology is to be much appreciated. But in the process some TIS interpreters have created new problems by ignoring history and overemphasizing the role of theology in interpreting Scripture. Evangelicals should warmly accept many of the principles of TIS, such as the connection between theology and exegesis, the critique of the reader by the text, and the unity of the Bible. TIS can spur Evangelicals on to think more about how to further the connection between theology and exegesis in training pastors, perhaps by encouraging more interaction between the disciplines or team-teaching classes on occasion (an OT theology class


taught by an OT scholar and a systematic theologian, for example). TIS reminds Evangelicals that sometimes less time should be spent on minor textual details and more on the larger theological message.\(^{74}\)

TIS also challenges Evangelicals to rethink the presuppositions we bring to the text. For example, why is it that the “against the grain” readings of David Clines are not followed by Evangelicals?\(^ {75}\) Is reading “with the grain” simply good reading, or does belief in the reality of the God of the OT and the inspiration of the Bible make any difference in the way the OT is interpreted? Is the Hittite story about the storm god’s sending a thunderbolt against the enemy read the same way as the story about the large stones thrown by Yahweh against the Canaanites, or is the former a religious explanation of a nonmiraculous event while the latter is a true divine intervention?\(^ {76}\) Do Evangelicals harmonize texts simply because that is what a good reader does or at least partly because the text is from God? TIS encourages Evangelical biblical scholars to think more clearly about how their theology affects their hermeneutic in practice.

While all parts of the history–theology spectrum may be legitimate at certain times and locations, a major question for Evangelicals is which position is legitimate for presenting the Bible in the local church (and how pastors are trained for that task). In the context of the local church, Evangelicals should avoid the theologically opposed category because it does not provide direct help for the church. The Bible is a good source for Hebrew and Greek grammar and ancient history. But that is not why God gave us the Bible: the Bible is about God and his desire to have relationship with humans. Evangelicals believe the Bible was given not so that we can learn grammar; we have the Bible so that we can have a relationship with God.\(^ {77}\) This is what we should be proclaiming in our churches, not Hebrew or Greek lectures. In the academy, the temptation can be strong for Evangelicals to remove theology from their work in order to gain legitimacy. While this can be a beneficial method for scholarly work for the guild, TIS reminds Evangelicals of the importance of connecting theology and biblical studies in the context of the local church and training pastors.\(^ {78}\)

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74. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation*, 70. This is not to denigrate Evangelicals who specialize in areas such as grammar or textual criticism; it is simply a reminder not to spend so much time on these details that the larger theological picture is lost.


77. Part of Timothy Larsen’s definition of an Evangelical is one “who stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual to bring about conversion and an ongoing life of fellowship with God and service to others” (Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” 1).

78. The rise in popularity of TIS has even granted some measure of academic respectability to the enterprise of connecting theology with biblical studies (although certainly not in all quarters of the academy).
churches need pastors who can do more than give dry exegetical lectures: they need pastors who can connect the Bible with the reality of God and the Christian’s relationship with God.

Likewise, on the other end of the spectrum, Evangelicals should avoid the theologically focused category in the local church. A key part of the Evangelical distinction is that they have a high regard for the Bible: Timothy Larsen’s definition of an Evangelical includes one “who has a preeminent place for the Bible in her or his Christian life as the divinely inspired, final authority in matters of faith and practice.” 79 In contrast to that standard Evangelical view, the theologically focused position makes its way forward with too little reference to the Bible. Instead of being able to self-correct based on the biblical text, the theologically focused category can too easily conform Scripture to the preexisting theology. This kind of approach to the Bible too easily leads to local churches’ making the Bible say whatever they want it to say. The dangers associated with flattening diversity, rejecting history, and reducing the chances for theological self-correction from the text make this an unattractive position for Evangelicals. This certainly does not mean that Evangelicals should reject theology and theologians; what Evangelicals want to avoid is a dilution of the authority of the Bible. Theology is essential for the local church, but not at the expense of downplaying the Bible or making the Bible into a wax nose which the reader can shape at will. For their part, Evangelical biblical scholars are in a good position as interpreters of the Bible who also love theology to remind TIS interpreters not to overrun the Bible with theology. 80 Because they can speak as friends to TIS interpreters, it is to be hoped that dialogue between Evangelical biblical scholars and TIS interpreters can be beneficial to both sides.

The best place for Evangelicals on the spectrum is near the theologically open or theologically curious positions. An understanding of the Bible that takes full account of its historical context is authoritative for the Evangelical church, pulling Evangelicals toward the left of the history–theology spectrum. But at the same time, Evangelicals do not want to become so enamored of the historical context of the Bible that the transformation of the reader and interaction with God are ignored, pulling Evangelicals to the right. As with many areas of tension in Evangelical life, the tension between text and theology needs to be kept, resisting the temptation simply to cut history or theology out of the equation. Each of the two positions finds usefulness at different points in church life. The theologically open position is excellent for preaching and devotional life, as the people of God go routinely to the Bible to see what God would have for them. But many times in church life the people of God have specific theological issues to

which an answer or direction is needed; in these situations the theologically curious position is well suited to the fit the need. These positions on the spectrum are most effective in keeping the Bible in a central position as well as keeping God as the central focus, leading to relationship with him and transformation in those who follow him. Doing their work in these positions will help to keep Evangelical biblical scholars responsible to the church and provide greater accessibility of the work of these scholars as theology and theological presuppositions are stated more clearly.

CONCLUSION

TIS has exploded on the scene of biblical studies, producing a stream of publications that shows no sign of slowing. Sessions on TIS at the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature are plentiful and packed, and Evangelicals can be thankful that theology is being discussed in the biblical studies guild more than in the past. TIS can play a fruitful role in encouraging Evangelical biblical scholars to interact more with theology and examine their own theological presuppositions. But along with these positive trends, TIS has the potential to go to extremes in its love for theology. Evangelical biblical scholars can help play a role within TIS to encourage TIS interpreters not to drift too far from the Bible.