

Introduction

Revised and Expanded Edition

Much has happened in the field of biblical studies since the original publication of this book. There have been archaeological discoveries and rumors of archaeological discoveries (ossuaries and tombs being among the most notable). There have been new skirmishes in the Bible wars, especially over the interpretation of certain ethical issues. Some new translations have appeared, and some methodologies of biblical study have been revamped or fine-tuned.

However, arguably the most important development in the field of biblical studies since the turn of the twenty-first century has been the turn (or, rather, return) to the *theological* interpretation of Scripture. This development expresses a deep desire on the part of many biblical scholars and theologians to explore and articulate ways of biblical interpretation that attend to the biblical text primarily as theological text, as vehicle of divine revelation and address. To many outside the theological guild but inside the church (and perhaps even outside it), such a focus is altogether self-evident and natural. To many inside the guild, however, years of exposure to nontheological interpretation have made reading the Bible as Scripture seem almost abnormal, and those of us who wish to change this bias are aware of the challenges before us as we attempt to move forward in the appropriately theological task of biblical interpretation.¹

Already discussed and embraced in the first edition of *Elements* (especially in chapters 1 and 8), theological interpretation receives much more attention in this edition, accounting for the most significant change: the considerable expansion and renaming of chapter 8. That chapter is now called, not merely “Reflection,” but “Reflection: Theological Interpretation.” Three points about these changes need to be made here.

¹This paragraph is drawn, with minor modifications, from the opening paragraph of my article “A ‘Seamless Garment’ Approach to Biblical Interpretation?” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1 (2007): 117–28.

First, theological interpretation does not own a particular exegetical method or methodology. Its practitioners can, and do, make use of a variety of methods. My own approach (expressed in this book) is still rather eclectic but largely synchronic, as discussed in chapter 1.

Second, the revised chapter 8 is longer and more theoretical than most of the other chapters, and deliberately so because of the subject matter. The chapter still makes practical suggestions, but it does so within a more fully developed framework than a purely “nuts-and-bolts” approach would do.

Third, despite the location of the extended discussion of theological interpretation near the end of the book, readers should not conclude that theological interpretation is an afterthought, or that it takes place only after all the “real work” of critical or scientific (historical and literary) exegesis is finished. Rather, theological interpretation involves an attitude, a *modus operandi*, and a goal (*telos*) that permeate the entire process. In sum, theological interpretation means reading the scriptural text as closely and carefully as possible, employing the best methodologies available, because theological interpreters believe that during and after that process they can hear God speak in and through the text.

This increased emphasis on theological interpretation does not in any way negate the basic historical and literary aspects of sound exegesis that any interpreter of the Bible needs to consider. In fact, interpreters who are not committed to a theological reading of the biblical texts will still profit from the basic approach and method advocated in this book. That is to say, whether one considers theological interpretation the main course or an unnecessary dessert, there are certain staples of an exegetical meal that are common to all careful readers of the Bible, and those staples constitute the building blocks both of this book and of any good exegetical method.

Another major addition to this edition is the inclusion of a much-needed sample exegesis paper on a text from the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. Other alterations to this edition are relatively minor but significant: changes to a few exercises, clarification and/or elaboration on several matters, and especially the addition of new resources. The purpose of the book, and its intended audience, remain the same: *Elements* provides students and ministers with an unapologetically practical approach to exegesis that is built on a strong theoretical foundation.