



St. Francis Virtual House of Studies

Introducing SCRIPTURAL STUDIES



The Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament (with the Apocryphal books thrown in for good measure) are the foundation documents of Christianity in all its forms, Catholic (including Anglicans and Lutherans) as well as Protestant (with its broad spectrum of faith traditions). Coming to terms with our sacred writings requires devout meditation and asking the Holy Spirit for guidance, of course. It also compels us to acquire knowledge of the texts, the historical contexts, the assumed cosmologies, and the linguistic nuances of these scriptures.

The intellectual task requires as much patience as it does a commitment to constant inquiry. The Bible is not a single and seamless piece of writing. It is an anthology of a variety of *genres* of literature. The oldest portion achieved its final form in the 5th century B.C. and likely was a refinement and synthesis of various previous writings, in some cases going back to perhaps the 10th century B.C. The New Testament was written in the 1st century A.D. and some portions may not have been cast into the form with which we are familiar until early in the 2nd century A.D. Thus, we must come to terms with the variability of the historical contexts, assumed cosmologies, and linguistic nuances in writings that are spread over more than a millennium.

In addition to the problems inherent in the study of texts over such a huge expanse of time, dealing with scripture also involves questions of canonicity (those writings considered authoritative) and interpretation (the question of what is God's subtext).

In the sections that follow we will address these and other considerations in the study of scripture and recommend a few representative sources for more detailed study.

1. Study Bibles

A good Study Bible—one providing summaries and historical context for each book as well as notes on translation nuances as well as the basic texts—is indispensable. The following two are highly recommended.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible, Edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy. New York: Oxford University press, 3rd edition, 2001.

Even if one is not fond of the New Revised Standard Version (this compiler is) this is worth considering. The introductions and articles, annotations, and translator's footnotes are excellent.

HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version (with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books). Edited by Wayne A. Meeks. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

One can frankly toss a coin for the difference in quality and usefulness between this Study Bible and that published by Oxford. If one is both a bibliophile and has the resources, it is worth having both. Study Bibles based on other translations simply don't achieve the level of scholarly excellence of the Oxford and HarperCollins products.

2. Introductions and Resource Books

We will take up specific commentaries in the Hebrew Scripture and New Testament bibliographies. A solid introduction to the entirety of scripture is almost as useful as a good Study Bible, and provides a general overview that can be both complimented and challenged by commentaries on specific books.

Christian E. Hauer and William A. Young, An Introduction to the Bible: A Journey into Three Worlds. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 7th edition, 2007.

The "Three Worlds" are literary, historical and contemporary. Hauer and Young thus take into account the texts, the contexts in which they were written, and the contexts in which we read them in our own time. This useful device takes the reader into the world of critical analysis and provides a great deal of food for thought in preparation for serious biblical study.

Stephen L. Harris and Robert L. Platzner, The Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2nd edition, 2007.

Stephen L. Harris, The New Testament: A Student's Introduction. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 6th edition, 2008.

These two volumes are particularly useful for those interested in disputed passages and writings that were not eventually included in the canon of scripture.

***Biblica: The Bible Atlas - A Social and Historical Journey Through the Lands of the Bible*, Edited by Barry J. Beitzell. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's, 2007.**

This enormous book (oversized and 575 pages long) is an excellent atlas, and so much more. The essays on social and economic contexts of the various books of the Bible by some of the most respected biblical scholars around the world make this a valuable resource. One can usually find it for an unusually low price on Amazon.

3. Concordance

Most Concordances on the market are well prepared and accurate. If your preference is other than the New Revised Standard Version you will have plenty of choices. If you prefer NRSV the following is the most comprehensive.

John R. Kohlenberger III, *The NRSV Concordance Unabridged, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: An Exhaustive Index of All Occurrences of All Words in the New Revised Standard Version*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991.

4. Hebrew and Greek Aids

Even if you do not intend to become a student of Hebrew and Greek, some familiarity with the nature of these languages is important for Biblical Studies. For this purpose a good introduction to the grammar and syntax of each language and an interlinear or parallel presentation of the original languages and English Translations can be very helpful. (Of course, a little Aramaic would help for portions of Daniel and Ezra and one verse of Jeremiah, but never mind.)

Brian L. Webster, *The Cambridge Introduction to Biblical Hebrew with CD-ROM*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

The accessible, almost intuitive, approach to the Hebrew language and a CD with a workbook and a variety of resources make this the best introduction now available.

William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Language*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2003.

If there is a better introduction in this field, I have yet to find it.

Peter James Silzer and Thomas John Finley, *How Biblical Languages Work: A Student's Guide to Learning Hebrew and Greek*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004.

If one is pressed for time, this one volume introduction to both languages is a good choice. The linguistic approach is so well developed that it would not be a bad book to have even if one had already invested in the two recommendations above.

The Parallel Bible Hebrew-English Old Testament: With the Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia and King James Version, Edited and arranged by Aron Dotan. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003.

The use of the Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia gives the reader the best Hebrew text available.

Word Study Greek-English New Testament With Complete Concordance, Edited and arranged by Paul R. McReynolds. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1999.

The presentation is both interlinear and parallel. The Greek text and a word-for-word English translation are presented in alternating lines with the New Revised Standard Version English text in a side column. These features, along with a complete concordance in both a Greek and an English concordance make this a valuable study tool.

5. The Canon, History, and Pop-Culture

Roger Beckwith, The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church: And Its Background in Early Judaism. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985.

This is a well argued rationale for the authenticity of the received canon of the Old Testament, but presented in such a way that the plentiful evidence can be used to create an alternative perspective.

Bruce M. Metzger, The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

What Beckwith does for the Old Testament Metzger does for the New Testament.

Megan Hale Williams, The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Williams does not deal with the problem of canonicity but she does a fine job of placing the development of the canon in the context of the web of intrigue that was Rome, the "Second City" of the empire in Jerome's time.

Neil R. Lightfoot, How we Got the Bible. New York: MJF Books, 3rd edition, 2003.

This is a well argued, if not entirely compelling, apologia for the traditional canon of scripture, supported by respectable scholarship.

Jaroslav Pelikan, Whose Bible Is It? A History of the Scriptures Through the Ages. New York: Viking, 2005.

Although he does not ignore the problem of canonicity, Pelikan's concern is less with what was in the Bible at any given time than how the Bible is perceived in different times and by different populations. Perhaps the title should have been Which Bible Is It?

David S. Katz, *God's Last Word: Reading the English Bible From the Reformation to Fundamentalism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.
What Pelikan does for the entirety of Judeo-Christian History Katz does for the Anglophone world from the Reformation to the early 21st century.

***I Never Knew That Was in the Bible! A Resource of Common Expressions and Curious Words from the Bestselling Book of All Time*, Edited by Marin H. Manser. New York: Testament Books, 1999.**

In addition to be an interesting compendium of the contribution of the Authorized ("King James") Version of the Bible to phrases in the English language, the book is simply great fun.

6. Methods and Hermeneutics

Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008.

Levering presents a case for combining critical and historical tools with a phenomenology of faith, thus placing the reader of Scripture in the worlds of both scholarship and faith. Such an approaches which are exclusively either anthropocentric or theocentric. This, of course, creates some ambiguity and tension. The reader thus enters fully into the perspective of the Biblical world.

Henry Virkler, Karelyne Ayayo, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007.

This is an accessible introduction to historical-cultural and contextual analysis, lexical-syntactical analysis, theological analysis, genre identification and analysis. One has to look elsewhere for a comprehensive overview of the history and subtleties of hermeneutics, but this is a good place to gain an initial, if somewhat limited, view of Biblical interpretation.

Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic Press, 2006.

This is one of the books one could profitably turn to after have read Virkler and Ayayo. The perspective is Evangelical. The scholarship is solid.

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009.

And after having read Osborne, one could profitably turn to Vanhoozer. He is also an Evangelical and his scholarship is also solid. His mastery of the nuances post-modern theorists such as Searle, Austin, Ricoeur, Gadamer, Hirsch, Derrida and Fish is impressive and is put to good use in the development of perspective that is at once faithful to the Christian tradition and comfortable in the intellectual world of the 21st century. (Those familiar with Stanley Fish will immediately get the parody in the main title).