



Systematic Theology for the Local Church
#7—Interpreting the Bible—Part VI¹
Doing Theology: The Biblical Discovery Process
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April 29, 2007

Preparation for Bibliology

Begin to study Sections 6-12 in House's *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*. Read all of Packer's *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. Packer's book was written against the background of the debate with Fundamentalism in the late 20th century. However, his presentation of the systems of authority (reason, tradition and Scripture) is timeless. Also, begin to read Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Part I, which deals with bibliology.

For the next study—Presuppositions—you should read my article entitled “Understanding Covenant Theologians: A Study in Presuppositions.” This appeared in the *Grace Theological Journal*, Fall 1989 and will be available at BelFel.org.

In the next few studies I will make references to *exegesis*, for which you should learn a definition. I provide one here. The portion underlined is worth memorizing. This definition is also available in the “Definitions for Systematic Theology” Word document available on the BelFel web site.

Exegesis is the actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning; differs from exposition, which is a setting forth for an audience of conclusions already arrived at by an interpreter; differs from hermeneutics, which is the set of rules or principles that is used to carry out exegesis; differs from theology, which in one sense is the summary of findings from exegesis, although theology and exegesis must go hand in hand.

Theology and Scientific Method

For many people the word theology is frightening. Perhaps for some it immediately suggests boredom. But actually it involves some quite ordinary concepts. Let's think for a moment—and this may seem to be off the subject, but it actually isn't—about how a scientist carries out his work (assuming he is a good scientist). He first accepts some body of data as relevant to his work. Then he attempts to organize the data in a reasonable way. Analyzing what he has observed, he asks what explanation might account for all that he has seen. This explanation may be simple or quite detailed but it should in some way provide a means of tying together all the information. This explanation is really a hypothesis, a guess about how things work. And it is a kind of *interpretation* of the data that has been observed. The scientist then makes a guess about how things work. The scientist then seeks to verify what he has hypothesized. This should be both an attempt to falsify the explanation and to demonstrate its validity.² Thus he may devise an experiment in which the goal is to see if constant, repeatable outcomes can be achieved. Or, he may look for more data and see if they fit with his explanation. If they fit, the explanation is retained. If they don't fit, or if the experiment doesn't produce what it was predicted to produce, then the explanation, interpretation, or hypothesis must be reworked. It is either modified, extended by added statements or discarded.

¹ Copyright 2007 by Paul S. Karleen. Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

² Graham N. Stanton, Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism, in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977,) 68. See also Robert Baum, *Logic* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), 465.

This process can never stop, since we live in a universe where there are always more data to analyze. Continual refinement may be necessary, and rarely does a scientist come to the point where he feels he has accounted for all the data. Take the flat-earth view. Some may believe that this explanation concerning the shape of the earth and related phenomena is entirely sufficient and that new data will do nothing to affect their hypothesis. In this case their explanation has passed into the realm of dogma. Most people believe that the earth is spherical. Once that is reasonably well established, it is accepted, and further work concerning the earth's shape and character is based on that. But the scientist must always leave himself open to the possibility that new data may alter some of his views. We now know, for instance, that the earth is slightly flat at the poles!

An example of “doing” science with the scientific method

A few weeks ago I came across an article entitled “Dazzling new images reveal the ‘impossible’ on the Sun.”³ This exemplifies a key feature of *good* scientific method—the need to always be open to new information and then integrate it into what has been hypothesized previously. Here is the link to this article: http://space.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn11432&feedId=online-news_rss20. I have provided below color pictures from the article. If you go online to the article, you can view an associated video directly from a link. You can also link to the video directly from my quote below if you are on line. The video will also be available on the Belfel web site with the audio and PDF of this study. Bolding in the article is mine.

The restless bubbling and frothing of the Sun's chaotic surface is astonishing astronomers who have been treated to detailed new images from a Japanese space telescope called Hinode.

The observatory will have as dramatic an impact on our understanding of the Sun as the Hubble Space Telescope has had on our view of the universe beyond, scientists told a NASA press conference in Washington, DC, US, on Wednesday.

Everything we thought we knew about X-ray images of the Sun is now out of date, says Leon Golub from the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics in Cambridge, Massachusetts, US. We've seen many new and unexpected things. For that reason alone, the mission is already a success.

Hinode (Japanese for sunrise) was launched in September 2006 to study the solar magnetic field and how magnetic energy is released as the field rises into the Sun's outer atmosphere. The mission was formerly known as Solar-B.

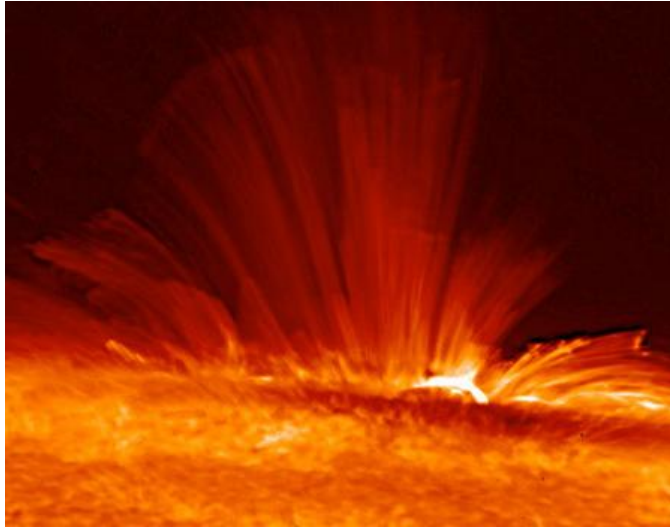
Seething and swaying

The spacecraft carries an optical solar telescope (SOT), an X-ray telescope (XRT) and an ultraviolet spectrometer. It orbits the Earth in a permanent twilight zone between night and day, which gives it a continuous view of the Sun.

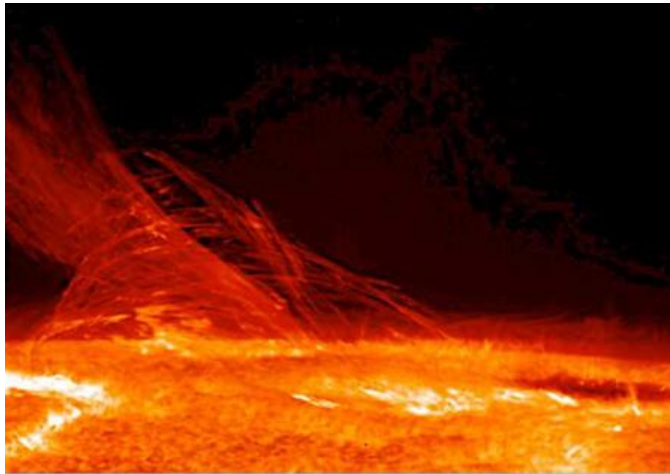
Hinode has sent back startling images of the Sun's outer limb. **Where astronomers expected to see a calm region called the chromosphere, they saw a seething mass of swaying spikes** (see image below right, and watch a [video of the spikes taken by Hinode](#)).

These structures are 8000 kilometres long and some extend twice that high, says SOT science team member Alan Title from Lockheed Martin Advance Technology Center in Palo Alto, California, US. Their speed is such that if you sat on the end of one, which I don't recommend, you could travel from Washington, DC, to San Francisco in about four minutes. These things are really moving.

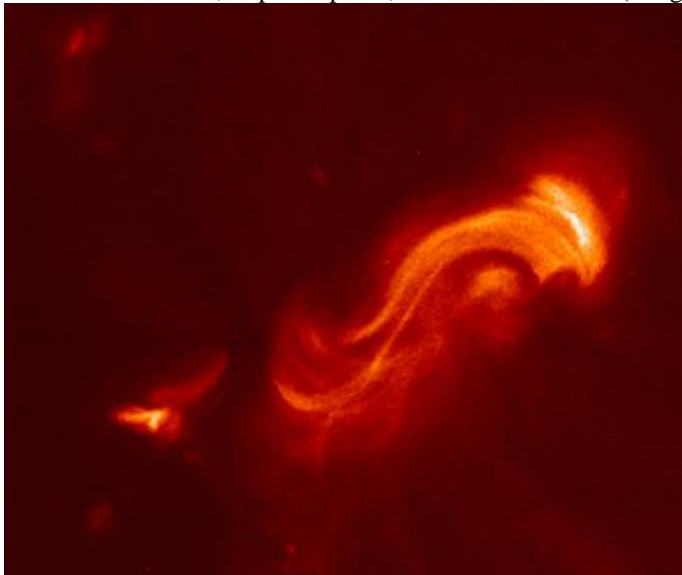
³ Hazel Muir, NewScientist.com News Service, March 21, 2007.



Charged particles follow magnetic field lines that rise vertically from a sunspot – an area of strong magnetic field. On the edges of the sunspot, the magnetic field lines bend over to connect to regions of the opposite polarity (Image: Hinode JAXA/NASA)



Long filaments of plasma connect regions of different magnetic polarity in the chromosphere, a thin layer of the Sun's atmosphere lying between its visible surface, or photosphere, and its outer corona (Image: Hinode JAXA/NASA)



S-shaped magnetic loops such as this one on the Sun are more likely than loops of other shapes to unleash radiation and charged particles, which can damage satellites around Earth

Crashing loops

Another surprise sighting is that of giant magnetic field loops crashing down onto the Sun's surface as if they were collapsing from exhaustion, **a finding that Golub describes as impossible. Previously, scientists thought they should emerge from the Sun and continue blowing out into space.**

Almost every day, we look at the data and we say – what . . . was that? says Golub, a member of the XRT science team.

Astronomers do not yet know what to make of the surprises, but they hope Hinode will help solve many big puzzles. One is that the temperature of the Sun's tenuous outermost atmosphere, or corona, is far hotter than the layers underneath, which are nearer its energy-generating core.

Scientists believe that tangled magnetic fields must somehow dump energy in the corona. Theorists suggested that twisted, tangled magnetic fields might exist, says Golub. With the XRT, we can see them clearly for the first time.

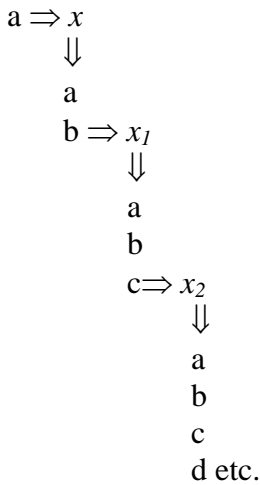
Astronomers hope Hinode's clear view of the Sun will also help them identify the magnetic field configurations that lead to the most explosive energy releases of all. That would enable better forecasts of stormy space weather, when solar eruptions can interfere with satellite communications and disrupt electricity supply networks on the ground.

The scientists involved are trying to make sense of the data that are in front of them and then state a coherent system that fits with other things they know. They also have to abandon hypotheses made in the past about such things as magnetic fields.

The interpretive process

In certain respects "doing" systematic theology relies on a similar process. The theologian is actually attempting to place an interpretation on the whole field of data that is the Bible. And he may link it with other areas of study and other things in the universe—historical events, language studies, observations of the physical universe, the passage of time, etc. Since the Bible does not give information in entirely structured, systematic, outlined form, we are obliged to bring order to it. The theologian first makes an initial hypothesis concerning something he has observed, for instance, words about God. He may state that certain verses appear to say that God has three "entities" associated with Him. Then he must look elsewhere to see if this is verified. He is attempting to prove or disprove what he has guessed as an explanation. He may then find that his guess was not wrong, but that it needs to be modified, for the data (biblical statements) show, as far as he can tell, that the three "entities" are Persons (as in Ps. 110:1). So he now states that he believes the Bible shows that God consists of three entities that are Persons. And so he continues, modifying and extending his explanation or interpretation. This process is illustrated in the figure below, where *a*, *b*, *c* and *d* are elements of data, and *x*, *x*₁ and *x*₂ are progressively modified conclusions. New evidence should lead to new or modified conclusions, with the process never stopping.⁴

⁴ For a description of this process from a slightly different perspective, see Ralph P. Martin, "Approaches to New Testament Exegesis," in Marshall, 229



In all of this, the theologian must work back and forth from little pieces of information to large pieces, from nearby to distant statements, from explicit to implicit, from language to culture to history and back. Each new piece of information must be made to fit reasonably with what has been seen before. As each piece is seen, it must be measured against the hypothesis, the explanation or interpretation that has been made for all the preceding information. This explanation is really a guess about how it *all* works, about what it all means (although one may work with subparts—the Trinity versus all of God’s Person and works, for instance).

This is a very reasonable way to proceed in approaching the Bible, for it actually views the Bible as a coherent document that can be understood as its parts are interpreted in light of the whole, and vice versa. This really amounts to saying that the Bible interprets itself, that is, all the different parts are needed in order to provide an explanation for the whole, and the whole, when related to the parts, explains them. That is why the supreme principle of biblical interpretation is that the Bible is its own best interpreter. All other principles of interpretation flow from this.⁵

The process of examining small portions of text is usually known as *exegesis*. Unfortunately, many have failed to see the intrinsic connection between exegesis and theology. Theology is nothing more than the summarizing of findings, the making of explanations of what has been observed. Some have noted in recent years that theology and exegesis are inseparable. One cannot do one without the other.

S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., described by Bruce Waltke as the greatest Bible expositor of the latter part of the 20th century, makes a powerful observation about the link between theology and exegesis:

[The] divorce of theology from exegesis is frequently represented as primarily an impoverishment of theology, which, of course, it is. But it is sometimes forgotten that contemporary exegesis as well has lost its grip on [systematic theology], with dire results for interpretation. We are quite willing to grant that theology cannot really be done well without exegesis, but we are not as willing, it seems to me, to grant that exegesis cannot be done well without systematic theology. Exegesis, armed with the original text and modern critical tools and methodology, too frequently sees itself as autonomously self-sufficient, pouring out its arid and superficial grammatical, syntactical, and critical comments, while the deeper meaning of the texts in the light of the broader problems at issue is lost to it. In the introduction to his commentary on 1 John, Principal Candlish spoke of his desire to bring out the full mind of the apostle upon the truths embodied in the letter, and then added, in words surely applicable to the study of all the biblical literature: For I am deeply convinced after years of thought about it, that it can be studied aright exegetically, only if it is studied theologically. William Manson, late

⁵ See J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 106.

Professor of New Testament at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, used to refer to this type of exegesis, the type that kept exegesis and theology in holy bonds of matrimony, as depth exegesis. It might just as well be called depth theology.⁶

This failure to see a necessary connection between exegesis and theology is due in great part to the error of those who have actually left the text of Scripture and attempted to do theology without taking the express statements of the Bible seriously. From the perspective of orthodox Christianity, this is not theology at all. And in practice it often ends up being more psychology or sociology than study of God and His works.

Let us illustrate this in the following way. Suppose that on the basis of the following statements we hypothesize that the cross-work of Christ was designed to vanquish Satan.

- Hebrews 2:14-15: Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.
- Colossians 2:15: And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.
- 1 John 3:8b: The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.

We predict on the basis of this that all cross-work passages will be satisfied by this explanation (i.e., will have to do with Satan). We do not have to look very far, however, before we find that they are not. We must then reformulate our hypothesis in the light of the information given in all the passages.

There is then a necessary circle in which one examines portions of the Bible, makes a tentative statement about their meaning, looks at other portions, measures them against what has been seen already, and adjusts the interpretation accordingly. Since we will never have a perfect understanding of the Bible (an assumption, but, I believe, a valid one), this process, this circle, must ever continue. Just as the scientist cannot stop, the theologian cannot stop either.

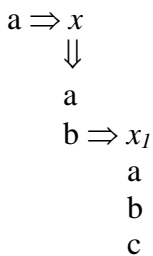
We can see then that theology properly done, far from being a frightening concept, is just another way of saying that one is gathering information from the Bible as well as other, secondary, sources, making interpretations and reanalyzing previous findings. For biblical interpretation, information given by general revelation (what we know about God and His works through nature, our consciences, etc.) is relevant data. This is a reasonable process, for the Bible interpreter is simply approaching the Bible as a document containing communicated information. We are to interpret the Bible just as we would interpret the speech of another person in a conversation. As we mentioned in previous studies, however, working with a written document from which we are removed by time and language makes the process much more difficult.

Interrupted interpretation

One of the dangers in theology is stopping too soon in the cycle. As the scientist must continually look for new data and attempt to falsify his hypotheses, so must the Bible interpreter. Let's take a central doctrine as an example. We may say that we believe that God is infinite, tri-personal, rational, etc. We may be very confident that all the biblical data support this. We may believe it with all our hearts. But we must leave ourselves open to finding out more about Him. We do not expect that we will find anything to contradict what we have concluded about these features of God, in great part because we have traversed the ground often. So with this doctrine we have great confidence that our interpretation is correct and can be built on to formulate other interpretations.

⁶ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "Romans 5:12—An Exercise in Exegesis and Theology," in *New Directions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 299

But there are many areas where we are more in doubt. We certainly would like to know more about the nature of the death of Christ, the process of sanctification, the local church and how God intends it to work, God's program for the ages, the relations between the synoptic Gospels and many other teachings. If we investigate any of these areas, make a generalization, an explanation, and fail to go on to look further, we are in trouble. We must constantly keep looking. Only when all the parts fit together well can we be confident that we have a solid interpretation. Of course there are many doctrinal areas today that are being investigated, in particular the nature of the Bible and prophetic issues. We cannot afford in any of these to stop with a particular interpretation as though it were final. In a sense, if we do that, we are allowing our theology to color unfairly our further examination of pieces of the text of the Bible. *In other words, we are allowing our interpretation or explanation to fly in the face of data we haven't looked at yet.* Then the process of interpretation breaks down. We could really say that we have *allowed our presuppositions to dominate us*, since we have not allowed the text to speak for itself.⁷ In this case, the process described in Figure 4.1 would be modified as shown in Figure 4.2. Here the conclusion x_I is accepted as final, and the piece of data c is never investigated.



We should keep in mind that the text of the Bible is always primary, not our statements about it. We are only attempting to summarize. That summarizing is necessary, but we can never allow it to take on a life of its own. All of us who ever read the Bible, no matter how simple or how scholarly, are in danger of imposing our own views and our own conclusions on it. The theologian, too, must be careful not to do that. He can thus ignore data, misunderstand them, or make them say what he wants them to say. The danger arises from the fact that we come to hold the theological statements as more important than the Bible itself, and, as they take on lives of their own, we pay more attention to them than to the Bible.

When we say, then, that we are to interpret the Bible so as to give each part its due and should work out all contradictions, we are simply affirming this process of looking at the parts, then comparing them with the other parts, then making an interpretation, then looking some more, all the while attempting to fit it all together. This is, of course, just what a person does in a conversation, using all the clues to get the whole message. It would be foolish to ignore some of the information and interpret it so as to allow contradictions, since one should assume that the speaker does not wish to feed him nonsense.

The student of Scripture should always be open to new understanding of God's revelation, being eager and willing to accept what he finds and integrate it into what he has already held to be true.

In the next study we will explore further the issue of presuppositions and the effects they can have on doing theology.

⁷ For a lucid discussion of prejudice as well as presupposition in biblical studies, see Stanton, 60-71.

Study Questions

1. Be able to quote the definition of exegesis (underlined part) from memory and to describe how it is different from exposition, hermeneutics and theology.
2. Which of the following statements are theological hypotheses (confidently held or less than confidently held, right or wrong—it doesn't matter)? Of those that are hypotheses, which do you believe involves stopping too soon or being influenced by presuppositions?

Examples:

Jesus said he would rise from the dead.

No: this is an indirect quote of what Jesus said

Jesus was involved in the creative activity of Genesis 1.

Yes: this involves gathering information from several places, putting it together and drawing a conclusion. I believe that it does not involve stopping too soon.

Paul was not a legitimate apostle.

Yes: this involves gathering information from several places, putting it together and drawing a conclusion (the wrong one, I believe). It has not considered all the evidence or it is influenced by presuppositions.

1. King David ruled in Jerusalem.
2. God's plan for the ages includes a kingdom on earth before the eternal state.
3. God is a Trinitarian being.
4. Inspiration is the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit on the writers of Scripture such that their words were the words God intended them to be.
5. The Bible contains 66 books.
6. The Holy Spirit is not divine.
7. The Holy Spirit is divine.
8. Jesus never claimed he is God.
9. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one."
10. The Bible reveals God's will for human beings.
11. Jesus will return to earth after the kingdom age.
12. The Bible is historically reliable.
13. Paul claimed to be the author of several NT books.
14. Jesus' resurrection was a demonstration of the Father's acceptance of His work on the Cross.
15. The main purpose of Jesus' death was to make people happy.
16. All human beings are born condemned because of what Adam did in the Garden.
17. The kingdom of Christ in Rev. 20:4 is underway now during the church age.
18. Paul admonished the Corinthians for their immorality.
19. A true Christian cannot lose his salvation.
20. Participation in the Lord's Table should be offered to Christians weekly.
21. At least one time Paul partook of the Lord's Table on the first day of the week.
22. You need to be baptized to be saved.
23. The bread and wine become the body of Christ during communion.
24. The death of Jesus on the Cross was designed to provide redemption for the elect.
25. The non-physical parts of human beings are the soul and spirit.

Answers

1. King David ruled in Jerusalem.
Not a hypothesis; an historical statement, unless one does not accept the record of Scripture

2. God's plan for the ages includes a kingdom on earth before the eternal state.
A hypothesis
 3. God is a Trinitarian being.
A hypothesis
 4. Inspiration is the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit on the writers of Scripture such that their words were the words God intended them to be.
A hypothesis
 5. The Bible contains 66 books.
Not a hypothesis
 6. The Holy Spirit is not divine.
A hypothesis; has not considered all the evidence; probably influenced by presuppositions
 7. The Holy Spirit is divine.
A hypothesis;
 8. Jesus never claimed he is God.
A hypothesis; has not considered all the evidence; probably influenced by presuppositions
 9. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one."
Not a hypothesis—essentially a quotation from the Bible
 10. The Bible reveals God's will for human beings.
A hypothesis
 11. Jesus will return to earth after the kingdom age.
A hypothesis; needs to look at more evidence
 12. The Bible is historically reliable.
A hypothesis
 13. Paul claimed to be the author of several NT books.
Not a hypothesis, unless one does not accept Paul's words about his writing
 14. Jesus' resurrection was a demonstration of the Father's acceptance of His work on the Cross.
A hypothesis
 15. The main purpose of Jesus' death was to make people happy.
A hypothesis that needs to look at the evidence further
 16. All human beings are born condemned because of what Adam did in the Garden.
A hypothesis
 17. The kingdom of Christ in Rev. 20:4 is underway now during the church age.
A hypothesis; has not considered all the evidence; probably influenced by presuppositions
 18. Paul admonished the Corinthians for their immorality.
Not a hypothesis; unless one does not accept Paul's books as written by him
 19. A true Christian cannot lose his salvation.
A hypothesis
 20. Participation in the Lord's Table should be offered to Christians weekly.
A hypothesis
 21. At least one time Paul partook of the Lord's Table on the first day of the week.
Not a hypothesis, since Luke says this in Acts 20 (unless one does not accept Luke's words)
 22. You need to be baptized to be saved.
A hypothesis; needs to look at the evidence further
 23. The bread and wine become the body of Christ during communion.
A hypothesis; needs to look at the evidence further
 24. The death of Jesus on the Cross was designed to provide redemption for the elect.
A hypothesis
- The non-physical parts of human beings are the soul and spirit.
A hypothesis