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What Role Do Bible Scholars Play in Your Bible Reading?

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What Role Do Bible Scholars Play in Your Bible Reading?

Abstract

"Biblical scholars have the skills and expertise to explain important historical and textual information [and] to provide guidance for what translations are most useful for close study."

Posting about helpful guides for understanding the Bible from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/what-role-do-bible-scholars-play-in-your-bible-reading/>

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

What Role Do Bible Scholars Play in Your Bible Reading?

 [all in allthings.org/what-role-do-bible-scholars-play-in-your-bible-reading/](http://allthings.org/what-role-do-bible-scholars-play-in-your-bible-reading/)

August 16,
2016

Benjamin Lappenga

To advocate on behalf of my own occupation is a risky business, and I do not fault any readers who raise an eye in suspicion of self-interest. Certainly there is such a thing as scholarly hubris, certainly abuse by poor and irresponsible scholars happens (“*you* can’t understand the text because you don’t know the Hebrew ...”), and this is wrong. Biblical scholars are not “better” or “above” any other believers, and there is no doubt that advocates for justice, social workers, pastors, and those working with marginalized populations are more needed and more worthy of support than biblical scholars.

Nevertheless, I will simply say it: Christians need to rely on and take seriously the work of biblical scholars. Here are four quick reasons (and there are many more):

1. The Bible is central to Christianity, and Christianity is a powerful social and religious voice in the world. Thus it is vital for both the church and for the good of the larger society that the sacred Scriptures are explored vigorously. As Larry Hurtado puts it, “The powerful effects of religions can be either nourishing or destructive, so we must either promote careful, critical and appreciative study of religions or we will leave the field to competing propagandists and superstition.”¹
2. Readers of the Bible are already dependent on the work of biblical scholars! Not only are our modern Bibles translations from the Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic (“translation,” which is always an act of interpretation). In addition, important decisions have been made regarding the differences that exist among the thousands of ancient fragments and manuscripts that have come down to us, resulting in the critical editions of the texts that form the basis of translation to begin with (“textual criticism”). Biblical scholars have the skills and expertise to explain important historical and textual information, to provide guidance for what translations are most useful for close study (e.g., try the NRSV, and understand the limits of paraphrases like The Message), and to introduce us to the modern and ancient resources most helpful for understanding the Bible (e.g., how and why should we know about Josephus, Philo, and the Dead Sea Scrolls?).
3. I’ll be straight: there is a lot of bad information about the Bible on the internet and in popular Christian books and resources. Not all study Bibles are created equal! And there are good arguments to be made that study Bibles are a bad idea for many (for fun, read about the premise of the no-verse-number Bible called [Bibliotheca](#). Good biblical scholars subject their work and decisions to the highest academic standards, and we need their expertise to help discern what information is good and what is not. For instance, here are two suggestions for places you can go that will give you reliable and scholarly information, one on the Bible as a whole and one for the New Testament: [Bible Odyssey](#), operated by the Society for Biblical Literature and [New Testament Gateway](#), edited by Mark Goodacre.
4. Using language like “good” is subjective, of course, and for Christians reading the Bible “good” should at the very least mean that the scholarship serves *theological* and *ecclesiological* purposes. Note: this does NOT mean that the work of those who bracket or reject Christian faith is to be shunned—quite the contrary. Yet biblical scholars bring a wealth of expertise and information about just what we are doing when we read the Bible (“hermeneutics”), and about how Christians can attend to this well (“theological interpretation”). Turn to excellent resources like the [Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible](#) (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Baker Academic) and the [Two Horizons](#) commentary series for help on these questions.

The hard part of all of this is that we all have a responsibility to *discern* between differing and sometimes competing voices within the guild of biblical scholarship. This is often done (consciously or not) along the lines of theological camps (“she is a good Reformed NT scholar,” “he is just promoting his Wesleyan agenda,” “that commentary series

isn't evangelical," etc.). To some extent this is inevitable and necessary—we need to rely on those we trust in matters that are beyond our levels of expertise.

I would suggest, though, that we balance this need with a confident openness to a range of scholarly biblical expertise. Do the shelves of your church's library or pastor's study only contain books and biblical commentaries from twentieth century North American evangelicals? Are your browser bookmarks and Twitter feeds confined only to biblical scholars from your own narrow tradition? If so, it is possible that you are missing out on resources that can unleash more of the fullness and richness of the Bible. Sometimes it is precisely those biblical scholars who are most unlike us that raise the right questions to help us see the text afresh. Certainly there are readings of passages and books written by biblical scholars that are unhelpful or irrelevant for people of faith. But seeking the advice of pastors and scholars you know and trust, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer, and seeking the input of the community of believers (local, but also distant and across time), make use of biblical scholarship. Resist the urge to be cynical, overwhelmed, or frightened by what biblical scholarship offers. As the Ethiopian eunuch replied when Philip asked if he understood the portions from Isaiah he was reading, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:31). Such guides include pastors and teachers and spiritual mentors of many kinds, but especially for those of us living in a time and place radically separated from the culture and languages of the Bible, such guides must also include biblical scholars.