

## Research Skills in Biblical Studies

The purpose of this exercise is to develop your abilities to find and use appropriate resources for studying a biblical text.

### Clarifying your question

Before starting research, it is important to name your question and consider what evidence would convince you of an answer.

Some questions cannot be answered by research but instead are questions of theology, practice, and discernment. Such questions are important, but they cannot be answered only by careful study of the biblical text.

*For example,*

- Literary study of the book of Luke can reveal the way that Luke describes the followers of Jesus. This study cannot answer the question, “How can I be a disciple today?”
- Historical study of the book of Genesis can suggest how the story of Abraham developed over time. This study cannot answer the question, “Was God immoral for commanding Abraham to kill his son?”

In BI100, we have been focusing on questions that can be addressed appropriately by **academic biblical studies**—careful, disciplined, focused study of the text and its worlds. Interpreters who best can help you with these questions have extensive training in their fields and are current with recent thinking.

### Identifying academic resources

While determining which resources are “academic” is somewhat subjective, these are some helpful criteria.

- Does the author have appropriate credentials for this work?
- Is this an up-to-date resource? As a general rule, resources that are more than 25 years old are not in conversation with recent study. Many “free” resources online are available primarily because their copyright has expired.
- Who is the publisher for the work? Here are some categories of publishers:
  - Self-published*: these volumes have not been peer-reviewed. They might be valuable, but there’s no required vetting procedure.
  - University presses* (Oxford, Princeton, Cambridge, Duke, etc.): these volumes tend to be more technical in nature, intended to be read primarily by other scholars but accessible to others.
  - Other academic presses* (Brill, Society of Biblical Literature, Mohr Siebeck, etc.): these presses tend to publish focused and often technical studies.
  - Church publishing houses* (Abingdon, Westminster John Knox, Fortress): these volumes seek to bring solid scholarship to the concerns of the church and world.
  - Theological presses* (Eerdmans, Baker, Intervarsity, etc.): these volumes often reflect the theological interests of the publishing house, while still engaging scholarship.

## Choosing a resource

Different academic resources address different questions about the text and offer different types of evidence to support their interpretation.

**There is no single resource that will answer all questions about a biblical text.**

For this reason, it is essential to understand what questions interpreters are asking and what the evidence they should offer to support the answers they offer.

Your training in BI100 helps you do this. The clearer you can be about the different methods of biblical study, the easier it will be to notice how an interpreter is using those methods.

Here's a review of the types of methods we've been using. Identified for each are some (not all) of the questions asked, the evidence needed, and the key words often associated with this approach.

### World in the text

#### *questions*

What does this word mean?

How is this passage organized? What is its key theme?

How is the book itself organized? What are its key themes and concerns?

#### *evidence*

Because these questions are about the text, the evidence must come from the *world in the text*. For example, to make a case about how a passage is organized, you need to keep pointing back to the text itself and showing how you believe it is organized. You might find a resource making a case about how the passage is organized, but what the resource says isn't evidence; rather, the resource is a guide pointing you to the evidence within the text. In this case, you credit the resource for the insight but then demonstrate why you agree by pointing to features of the text itself.

#### *key words*

literary; close reading; literary pattern; organization; literary context

### Word behind the text

#### *questions*

When was this text written? Was it written all at once or have sources been edited together to create it?

What was going on in the world of the author and how was the author addressing the concerns of his/her own time period?

#### *evidence*

Since there's no way to know for sure about the past, the goal of this approach is to make a plausible case for the historical setting—demonstrating how details in the text are best explained as originating in a particular historical setting. That is, evidence from the *world of the text* is linked with evidence from the *world behind the text*. Evidence from the *world behind the text* includes evidence outside of the Bible about ancient cultures. For that kind of historical

evidence, most of us need to consult specialized resources. For example, if I want to know what was going on at the time that the Priestly (P) source of the Pentateuch was written, I'm going to need historical information from outside of the Bible itself.

*key words*

source; redaction; composition; historical context; socio-cultural; social context

World in front of the text

*questions*

How does a reader's identity affect his/her reading of the text?"

What role does social location play in a given interpretation?

*evidence*

Because the question is about the reader, it will be answered by analyzing the social/cultural influences on an actual reader/interpreter of the Bible (in the present or perhaps an historical figure like Martin Luther or Martin Luther King, Jr.). Sometimes, a reader/author will do this work for you, saying something like, "I read this way based on my experience of being Jewish (or Pentecostal or queer or female, etc.)." Sometimes you need to make your own (humble) hypothesis about these influences: "I notice that the author highlights this aspect of the text and I wonder if that is because of her experience as an African-American woman."

*key words*

social location; appropriation; interpreter; feminist; African; queer; Jewish (and other identities)

**\*\* Stop and complete Exercise 1. \*\*\***

## Conducting library research

Access to the resources of our seminary library is through the library website, called Koha. You need to log in your seminary email address to see all results.

The white boxes at the top of the page are for searching. The smaller box on the left allows you to choose whether to search the seminary's own catalogue for materials that you can find physically in our library or conduct a "Discovery" search which allows you to see materials that are available to you electronically. You can use key words to find what you are looking for and sort the results by relevancy, date, etc.

There are different kinds of resources available through a theological library such as ours:

*Commentary series.* A commentary is a systematic study of one or more biblical books.

Publishers often commission a whole set of these studies in a series. Some examples: Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Sacra Pagina; New Cambridge Bible Commentary. In volumes like this one or more General Editors oversees the work of the author(s). Some commentaries begin with a Preface from the series editor before presenting the content created by the author.

*Monographs.* Monographs are stand-alone books. They are devoted to particular topics, themes, or questions.

*Journal articles.* Shorter than books, articles address specific topics. Because there is less production time required, journal articles tend to be a good way to learn of new developments in a field. Well-respected journals in biblical studies include (but are not limited to) *Journal of Biblical Literature*, *Biblical Interpretation*, and *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*.

*Online databases.* Our library has purchased rights for you to use online content at sites such as Oxford Biblical Studies Online. These resources are available to you as a student, and later as an alum of the institution.

**\*\*\* Stop and complete Exercise 2. \*\*\***

## Using the resources you find

Once you find a resource, you'll want to understand what question the author is asking, what conclusions s/he draws, and what evidence s/he provides for that conclusion. Even if you are only interested in one passage, it's helpful to read the author's Preface and/or Introduction. This is where the author will talk about questions that apply to the book as a whole.

Using the skills you've developed in BI100 helps you understand what the author is claiming and why. Your knowledge of the worlds of the text and the key words for each approach helps you understand the author's "moves."

**\*\*\* Stop and complete Exercise 3. \*\*\***