



Köstenberger, Andreas J. and Richard D. Patterson.

Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology

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Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Invitation to Biblical Interpretation (hereafter *IBI*) is the latest in a long line of introductory texts on biblical exegesis. While the subtitle speaks of the “hermeneutical triad,” this is not a text aimed at hermeneutics as a discipline in general. Readers interested in such works would do well to consult Anthony Thiselton’s voluminous body of work on the subject or more recently Stanley E. Porter and Jason C. Robinson’s *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory*. Nor is it a volume that offers an in-depth exploration of the history of biblical interpretation although there is a brief treatment on pp. 67-78. Gerald Bray’s *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* will satisfy readers on that front. *IBI* is, however, a textbook that will teach students sound exegetical principles from an evangelical perspective.

IBI is divided into three disproportionate parts with an introduction and epilogue of sorts. In the introduction Köstenberger and Patterson (hereafter K&P) explain their approach to interpretation, which attends to the history, literature, and theology of any given passage/book. They call this the “hermeneutical triad” and its didactic value is not to be underestimated. At the base of this hermeneutical triad are both history and literature, which, when properly understood, yield the theology of any given text. If one were to sum up this hermeneutical foundation in a single word it would be “context.”

The Bible is a collection of texts written *for* us even if it wasn't necessarily written *to* us. Like an inside joke between friends, the original audiences would have taken certain things for granted that modern readers miss completely. As such it becomes vital to understand as much as possible about the world of the people it was written *by* and *to* initially. So in Part 1, which is comprised of a single chapter, K&P cover the history corner of the triad by briefly surveying the broad sweep of biblical history before saying a few words about some of the archaeological discoveries that help to bring the text to life and confirm what has been written. An emphasis is placed on primary sources (e.g., OT, NT, ANE texts, Dead Sea Scrolls, Pseudepigrapha, Apocrypha) while not downplaying the value of secondary sources such as modern study Bibles and reference works. All of these resources help the modern interpreter to get in on the joke so to speak.

Part 2 is comprised of the bulk of this hefty volume and is dedicated to the literature corner of the triad, which K&P consider to be the "focus" of Scripture. This part is subdivided even further into three units that address Canon, Genre, and Language. The Canon unit has two chapters, one each on the OT and NT canons. Many a teacher has quipped that the OT is the NT concealed while the NT is the OT revealed, so placing a text in its canonical context helps to see what we're looking forward to or back at. The chapters on Genre cover historical narrative, poetry & wisdom, prophecy, parables, epistles, and apocalyptic. It's in these chapters that it becomes evident that this is not a textbook suited for the novice since K&P at times get very detailed and cover concepts that would make any newbie's head spin. The final unit on language covers grammar, syntax, discourse, linguistics, semantics, exegetical fallacies, and interpreting figurative language and assumes some acquaintance with the biblical languages; another indication that the beginner would do better with something else, e.g., Fee & Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*.

Part 3, also a single chapter, addresses the apex of the hermeneutical triad: theology. K&P focus most of their attention on offering a definition of biblical theology; outlining the different approaches to biblical theology; and offering sketch views of the NT authors' use of the OT. In truth, this chapter felt anticlimactic. If theology is the apex of the triad then one would expect more to be said about it. But the chapter I referred to earlier as "an epilogue of sorts" helps to make up for the thinness of the previous chapter. This concluding chapter is on how to put everything learned in the previous chapters into practice. K&P offer practical suggestions on how to prepare for study; how to prepare a sermon or Bible study lesson; and finally how to apply what we've learned from our exegesis to real life.

IBI is a well composed textbook on biblical exegesis but K&P aren't really doing anything new with this volume and they admit as much. Responsible interpreters have always focused on the areas of history, literature, and theology. But the method as laid out here is extremely approachable. The general principles work for any type of biblical literature and the specifics given aid the interpreter when they run into different types of literature. I'd argue that even literature outside of the Bible, be it ancient or modern, could be interpreted rightly by following the general rules laid out in *IBI*. From a methodological standpoint there's really nothing to fault them on, so kudos to K&P on that front.

I was also pleased to see that they didn't harp on the standard evangelical interpretive rule that says we can't take descriptive texts and understand them prescriptively. This is certainly not an interpretive principle that the Apostle Paul followed (Rom. 15:4 cf. 4:23-24; 1 Cor. 10:11). Their approach seems justifiably measured when they say, "Remember that historical events are descriptive of morality and conduct *but not always prescriptive*" (137, emphasis mine). They later note some "major mistakes" in preaching NT narratives and say, "We often mistake a description of an event for a command to the church" and then cite the casting of lots in Acts 1:26 as an example (753). It's a sound principle to not take *every* description as a prescription but it would also be a mistake to suggest, as some interpreters have, that *no* description can be taken as an example for us.

The layout of *IBI* is superb. Each chapter begins with a list of objectives and an outline and is closed with guidelines for interpretation, a glossary of key words, a series of study questions, assignments, and a bibliography. Add to this the full glossary at the end of the volume, detailed indices, and an extremely helpful appendix on "Building a Biblical Studies Library," and it becomes clear how valuable this textbook is. I can't imagine a teacher or student who couldn't benefit in significant ways from its use. It's also worth mentioning the sample exegeses that close out the main body of text in each chapter. This gives the reader concrete examples of what these interpretive principles look like in practice.

There were a couple of things that I was unsatisfied with but these do not detract from the overall value of this volume. The chapter on exegetical fallacies appears to have a bent towards showing that egalitarian interpretations of certain contentious passages are always based on one fallacy or another. This leaves the reader, or at least this reader, with the impression that there was an underlying polemical/apologetic agenda for this volume. I was also disappointed to see a lack of focus on textual criticism. Had this been a beginning level textbook then the lack of discussion

would be understandable, but I've judged this to be an intermediate work based on the authors' appeal to the original languages and some of the complex subject matter when dealing with genre. That being the case, it's a general rule of interpretation that a text has to be established before it is interpreted. Devoting a chapter to the basic principles of textual criticism would have been most welcome. Still, in all, K&P have produced an excellent text that deserves a place in seminary classrooms and the educated non-specialist's library.