



Leithart, Peter J.

Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Books affect us, for better or worse, but they affect us nonetheless. As time goes on and we develop our thoughts in certain areas they affect us less than when we were still in the early stages of development. So it's rare that once we have things pretty well worked out that a book will come along and shake us enough to leave cracks in our foundations. It's even rarer that the foundation will become so thoroughly cracked that we consider replacing it entirely and building anew. Peter J. Leithart's *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture* is a foundation-cracking earthquake of a book and I don't say that lightly.

There was a time, before I had laid a solid hermeneutical foundation, when I would read the Bible for hours at a time. I'd read through the longer books (e.g., Genesis, Psalms, Matthew, etc.) or groups of shorter books (e.g., the Minor Prophets, the Pastoral Epistles, etc.) in a single sitting. My Bible was marked with inks of all colors and highlighted so that you'd hardly be able to see that the paper was white to begin with. I'd note recurring patterns, types, shadows, echoes and allusions throughout the Bible. I'd grab my *Strong's Concordance* with Hebrew and Greek dictionary in order to learn the root meanings of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words that seemed important in the sections I was reading. I'd then seek to find what was *really* going on *beneath* the text because I just knew that nothing could be as plain and simple as it seemed. I'd write papers making all these elaborate connections (filling in the blanks when necessary) and then show them to my friends at the Wednesday night Bible study we held in my (present day)

pastor's barber shop. We'd all sit and bask in the glorious revelation, giddy with excitement for what the Lord had shown us in his word, and eager to see what he'd show us next.

But during that time my foundation was still wet and loose. It hadn't yet been mixed with stabilizer and poured into its form and given the time to set up and harden. As I began to branch out and read more than just my trusty King James Bible I became enamored with Biblical scholarship. I saw that modern scholars, conservative and liberal alike, didn't read the Bible the way that I read the Bible. I feared that I might have been guilty of reading ideas into the text that simply were not there. That led to me mimicking their method of reading the Bible. Eventually I would acquire books on Biblical interpretation, as any good student would do, and they confirmed the reading strategies I had adopted from all of these scholars. They would also confirm, to my dismay, that I *had* been engaging in eisegesis (!) in my earlier attempts to dig beneath the surface for *deeper* meaning. I learned that "a text cannot mean what it never meant,"¹ that is, if the original audience wouldn't have understood it as I understood it, then my understanding had to be incorrect. I learned that the synchronic study of words is to be preferred to the diachronic study and that etymology has little if anything to do with a particular word's meaning in any given context.² In short, I learned that I was going about reading the Bible all wrong, and in turn I would go on to teach the members of my church that they had gone about reading the Bible all wrong. Or so I thought.

Then I requested a copy of *Deep Exegesis* for review from Baylor University Press and it arrived some months later. There it sat for nearly a year on a shelf with 2½ dozen other books on exegesis and hermeneutics, waiting patiently to be read at such a time as this. I've been reading Leithart's blog for years now, and he's thrice contributed to my annual "Trinity Blogging Summit," so I'm no stranger to his vast intellect, yet I was still overwhelmed by the depth and breadth of his reading. Leithart is just as at home with Homer, Ovid, Augustine, or Shakespeare as he is with Jane Austen, Kant, Calvin, or Umberto Eco. He moves effortlessly between works of English literature, ancient and modern poetry, philosophy, Old Testament and New Testament Biblical studies, patristic, medieval, and modern theology, literary criticism, history, linguistics,

¹ See Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (3rd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 26-27; cf. Haddon Robinson, "The Heresy of Application," in *The Art & Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators* (eds. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 307.

² See Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (rev. and exp. ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), chapter 1; cf. Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1989), 113-15. Silva is much more thoroughgoing and nuanced on this topic than Cotterell and Turner.

and classical and popular novels, as well as films and music, and all this with an eye on John 9's depiction of Jesus giving sight to the man who was blind from birth; and all this with the intent to say something about interpretation in general, not just Biblical interpretation in particular. This is a book for people who read the Bible, but not *just* for people who read the Bible, or people who *just* read the Bible.

Leithart employs a number of helpful analogies, which form the chapter titles (1. The Text is a Husk: Modern Hermeneutics; 2. Texts are Events: Typology; 3. Words are Players: Semantics; 4. The Text is a Joke: Intertextuality; 5. Texts are Music: Structure; 6. Texts are About Christ: Application), in order to argue in favor of a "hermeneutics of the letter," i.e., "attending to the specific contours of the text—the author's word choices, structural organization, tropes and allusions, and intertextual quotations." (vii)

Leithart isn't only concerned with *what* texts mean but also with *how* texts mean. Interpretation requires more than simply discarding the "husk" (the very words themselves) in search of the "kernel," i.e., some tropological point, whether that point be the underlying ethical, moral, or practical message, or even if the point is Jesus or theology itself (chapter 1).

Texts, like events, cannot be fully known until they are over. They change and grow as the narrative progresses but they also shift and take on new meaning as they come into contact with other texts (chapter 2).

Word studies and etymology are passé; everybody knows that such things are no longer important or bring anything significant to the science of interpretation, right? Maybe not. "Words are players," we're told. And words, as players, "do the unexpected, or do the expected in unexpected ways." (82) "[I]f words are players then their background affects their behavior, even if the background never comes to the foreground. We cannot understand characters without knowing something about their hidden past." (93) But their hidden past involves much more than what a word originally meant. There are all sorts of unstated assumptions hidden in the text.

"[T]he surpassing failing of modern interpretation is not over-reading but drastically under-reading Scripture. Interpreters should aim for both accuracy and fullness. We want to hear as precisely as possible what is being said, but surely we also want to hear all that is being said." (110) "The text is a joke," but every joke requires the hearer to possess certain information and then bring that information to the joke before they can laugh at it; without that information the joke isn't funny (chapter 4).

But “texts are music” as well, and music is complex, multiply structured, and repetitive while being arranged to tell “several stories simultaneously. [...] A good interpreter has a good sense of textual humor, and he must also develop an ear for the multiple melodies, not to mention the complex rhythms of texts. A good interpreter must bring a body of knowledge to the text, or he will find nothing there, and he must learn to hear more and more by repeated, disciplined listening.” (144)

And finally, “Scripture is about Christ, but the Christ of Scripture is not only himself but also his body. The Christ who is the subject matter of Scripture is the *totus Christus*.” (173) In other words, contra Richard Hays, the interpreter doesn’t need to choose between a Christocentric or ecclesiocentric reading of Scripture, because Scripture is about the *totus Christus*, and the church is the body of Christ. Texts are about both him and us.

Leithart describes his method of interpretation as akin to the “fourfold method developed by medieval Bible teachers,” that is, “the literal sense of the text opened out into a christological allegory, which, because Christ is head of his body, opened out into tropological instruction and, because Christ is King of a kingdom here yet also coming, into anagogical hope.” (207)

Leithart’s “hermeneutics of the letter” is refreshing in its critique of the modern hermeneutical enterprise. It challenges the status quo at every turn and challenges prevailing paradigms. He’s not afraid to have a go at a generation of scholars influenced by Barr’s *Semantics of Biblical Language*, but he does so respectfully, even if at times exaggerating the disagreement between he and them. Most striking, however, is that what Leithart is proposing is nothing new; in fact, it has a pedigree dating back to the Biblical writers themselves! The “fourfold method” he attributes to medieval Christian theologians is not unlike the fourfold PaRDeS (P’shat, Remez, D’rash, Sod) method of rabbinic Jews, and we find traces of it all throughout the patristic corpus.

This “hermeneutics of the letter” has ramifications for many areas of Biblical interpretation, not the least of which is Bible translation (see 77-82). If the “husk” (word form, order, etc.) is as important as the “kernel” (the message or main principle) then this would seem to argue in favor of a more formally equivalent method of translation, or at least, if husk and kernel are seen as equally important, an intentionally median method that purposely (rather than out of necessity due to constraint) seeks to employ the best of both formal and functional/dynamic equivalency. Leithart’s hermeneutic encourages a much more robust reading of Scripture (or any other text one wishes to engage for that matter) than the standard historical-grammatical or historical-critical methods so many Bible readers are used to employing.

There are many things to commend this volume and few to condemn it. I was most taken by its ability to get me to totally rethink my approach to interpreting Scripture. Upon reading a simple question I felt my hermeneutical foundation shaking; Leithart matter-of-factly asks, “Why is it a problem to be ‘pre-critical?’” (77) Wait a second, what?!! Indeed! Why *is* it a problem to be pre-critical? As silly as this sounds, it’s not a question that I even once asked after swallowing, hook, line, and sinker, the proposition that it *was* wrong to be pre-critical (perhaps I would have come to this conclusion sooner had I read David Steinmetz’s “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *ThTo* 37/1 [1980]: 27-38). Leithart provides plenty of reasons why pre-critical exegesis is valid, and in many respects, preferable.

I was also challenged at nearly every turn throughout this work. Drawing from the vast array of sources that he did further confirmed just how little I know and it quite literally made my brain hurt as I attempted to wade through the deep waters of Leithart’s exegetical endeavors. But through all of it he kept coming back to John 9, which is a text I’m very familiar with, and it helped to make sense of the things that I didn’t understand initially. *Deep Exegesis* is a fantastic resource that should be required reading for every hermeneutics class in every seminary or university the world over. This book deserves several careful readings and each reading should pay attention to the letter as much as to the spirit. Words are his material and Leithart is a master craftsman. Pay attention to the husk, players, jokes, music, and Christ throughout this volume; you’ll be a better interpreter for it.