

## C. Stenschke

Prof. C. Stenschke  
Biblich-Theologische  
Akademie, Wiedenest  
and Department of  
Biblical and Ancient  
Studies University of  
South Africa  
E-mail: Stenschke@  
wiedenest.de

---

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v39i1.13>

ISSN 1015-8758 (Print)  
ISSN 2309-9089 (Online)  
Acta Theologica 2019  
39(1):246-249

Date Published:  
24 June 2019



Published by the UFS  
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

© Creative Commons  
With Attribution (CC-BY)



# REVIEW

## FOR THE LOVE OF GOD'S WORD: AN INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Andreas J. Köstenberger, Richard D. Patterson,  
(Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic; Edinburgh:  
Alban Books, 2015). 444 pp., hardbound. ISBN  
978-0-8254-4336-7, 24 USD.

While there is a plethora of more or less technical guides to the more traditional methods of biblical interpretation and many volumes on one or several of the more recent approaches, the present volume is very welcome as an easily accessible introduction to biblical interpretation for beginner students or interested lay people. The authors know what they are talking about: Richard D. Patterson has provided commentaries on several Old Testament books, and Andreas Köstenberger, from the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, is a well-known specialist in Johannine studies, but also addresses wider themes. In their introductory section, they introduce what they call the “hermeneutical triad”, consisting of the history, literature, and theology (pp. 17–27). In short, for any given passage of the Bible, one should study its historical setting, the literary context (the literary dimension), and the theological message.

Studying the historical setting provides a proper grounding, since all Scripture is rooted

in real-life–history. God revealed himself in history, and the genres and language in which God chose to reveal himself reflect the historical context.

Second comes literature. Studying the literary context is the focus of bible study, since Scripture is a piece of writing, a text that has three major components: (1) canon; (2) genre; and (3) language. In studying the literary dimension of Scripture, we locate a passage's place in the canon, determine its genre, and interpret it in keeping with its genre characteristics, doing justice to the language used (which normally will involve outlining the passage to determine its flow of thought and performing relevant word studies).

Third is the climax of biblical interpretation: theology. While the biblical message is grounded in history and conveyed through literature, exploring the theology of a given passage of Scripture is the ultimate goal interpretation, since, as mentioned, Scripture is first and foremost God's revelation or self-disclosure to us (p. 13).

The authors also argue for the need for skilled biblical interpretation, warn of the costs of “failed biblical interpretation”

(this translates into fallacies arising from neglect of the context, proof-texting [reading one's preferred meaning *into* the text rather than deriving it by careful study *from* the text], improper use of background information ..., p. 20)

and describe the characteristics required of biblical interpreters. They must cultivate a set of interpretive virtues or competencies such as

historical-cultural awareness, canonical consciousness, sensitivity to genre, literary and linguistic competence, a firm and growing grasp of biblical theology, an ability to apply and proclaim passages from every biblical genre to life; and wisdom for continuing the interpretive task (p. 25).

In *part one*, “History”, the authors set the stage by offering a sketch of the intricate relationship between history and biblical interpretation, of chronology and archaeology. In closing, the authors offer guidelines for interpreting the historical-cultural background of the Bible (pp. 33–54).

*Part two*, “Literature”, first describes the Old Testament canon of law, prophets, and writings (pp. 61–81). The chapter outlines the content and significance of law, exodus, and covenant motives, and argues that in the view of the New Testament, these Old Testament themes can be coordinated under the rule of God and the concept of Messiah: the relation of God and of the Messiah to the law, the exodus, and the covenants,

and the relation of Old Testament Messianism to the New Testament. In the guidelines for understanding the relevance of Messianism at the end of this chapter, the authors suggest the following (p. 80, see also their reflections of the methods of biblical theology on pp. 362–370):

1. Determine which passages contain a messianic relevance. Look for relevant terminology or the presence of thematic connections with biblical references to the Messiah.
2. Evaluate the passage's contribution to God's plan in accordance with the coming of the Messiah under the terms of the new covenant.
3. Note the distinctive forms of the Messiah's ministry and compare them to the earthly ministry of Jesus.
4. Avoid the temptation to be overzealous with finding the pre-incarnate presence of Christ in the Old Testament, such as in every place the term "the angel of the Lord" occurs.

While many in the guild would dismiss such suggestions altogether or rightly emphasise that the Old Testament must first be interpreted on its own terms, Köstenberger and Patterson at least provide some guidance as to how the Old Testament may be interpreted responsibly in a Christian context and what criteria can be applied in doing so.

A similar chapter addresses the New Testament canon of Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypse (pp. 85–98). The aim of these chapters and of this step in the process of interpretation is to provide orientation in the "canonical landscape", that is, placing a given passage in its proper salvation-historical context (p. 23).

This is followed by a survey of the different literary genres in the Bible and how they are to be interpreted. The chapters are entitled "Enjoying a Good Story: Old Testament Historical Narrative" (pp. 103–119); "A Word from the Wise: Poetry and Wisdom" (pp. 123–159), "Back to the Future: Prophecy" (pp. 163–187), "Narrative (Gospels and Acts)" (pp. 191–211), "Calling for Discernment: Parables" (pp. 215–235), "Going by the Letter: Epistles" (pp. 239–267), and "Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Literature (Revelation)" (pp. 271–300). The following two chapters are devoted to the nature of biblical language and its interpretation ("Context is King: Discerning Discourse Structure", pp. 305–325, "A Matter of Semantics: Discerning Word Meanings", pp. 329–353).

The *third* and final *part* is devoted to the way from the Bible to theology. It addresses the process of "Making the Connection: Getting Our Theology from the Bible" (pp. 359–371) and provides guidance on "Getting Down

to Earth: Using the Tools, Applying the Word” (pp. 375–392, a survey of helpful resources available for Bible interpretation and discussion of how Scripture can be applied today; the authors promote a “principle-approach”, which, however, has its own pitfalls; see the nuanced discussion in I. H. Marshall (2004), *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to theology*, Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology; Grand Rapids: Baker. The volume closes with a glossary, an index to Scripture, and a subject index.

Each chapter opens with a statement of its objectives and chapter outline and closes with guidelines for interpretation regarding the chapter’s focus, a list of key words, suggestions for assignments, and references to a very limited number of key resources. Köstenberger and Patterson do not offer highly technical, critical, or nuanced discussions, rather they provide a simple, no-nonsense, and easy to use introductory volume for students in undergraduate courses in seminaries and some university settings who seek, or at least are willing, to engage one distinctly Christian approach to the Bible as Scripture. They use a minimum of technical language; their foundational approach is that of historic Christianity. The inclusion of and emphasis on applying the Bible to the contemporary context and the guidelines regarding how this can be done responsibly are significant for the African context where many students of the Bible and many others readily apply biblical passages or snippets thereof to themselves and others – for the better or for worse to themselves and their communities.