



Goahead Theological Seminary & College

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Biblical Studies

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Biblical studies is the academic discipline dedicated to the scholarly examination of the scriptures and related literature of Judaism and Christianity. In the Christian tradition, the Bible is conventionally divided into the New Testament and the Old Testament; collectively, the Catholic Church recognizes 73 books as its scriptural canon, while Protestant denominations recognize 66 books. Judaism, conversely, accepts only the Hebrew Bible—known as the Tanakh (a compilation comprising the Torah as the Law of Moses, the Nevi'im as the Prophets, and the Ketuvim as the Writings)—as its scriptural canon. Additionally, biblical scholars investigate other texts, such as Jewish Apocrypha, Jewish Pseudepigrapha, and Christian Apocrypha.

Overview

Biblical studies is an academic discipline that takes as its primary subject the Bible—the text transmitted through Judaism and designated as canonical by the Christian Church—and investigates its form, content, and essence by examining its connections to a wide range of related regions and literature. Although biblical studies constitutes a branch of Christian theology, it employs methodologies common to the general humanities; drawing upon the insights of linguistics, literary studies, archaeology, geography, history, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and other fields, it seeks to comprehensively or specifically analyze the various facets of the Bible—including its



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language, geography, history, social context, traditions, literature, and thought—thereby contributing to an understanding of the origins and distinctive characteristics of Christianity as a historical religion. Biblical studies was established when Johann Philipp Gabler (1753–1826) distinguished biblical theology—defined as a grammatical, historical, and genetic discipline—from dogmatic theology. Today, the field has branched into Old Testament studies and New Testament studies; while these sub-disciplines share common methodologies, each has evolved into a specialized and deeply focused area of study.

Old Testament Studies

Historically, the scope of this field typically traces the history and destiny of the Israelite people within the ancient Near East, spanning from the earliest origins up through the Roman era. Geographically, it encompasses a vast region—extending eastward to the Indus River, northward to the shores of the Caspian Sea, and westward to include Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula—while also taking into view the various civilizations and cultural spheres within this domain. Traditionally, the core disciplines intrinsic to Old Testament studies comprise Introduction, Exegesis, and Theology; supplementary and foundational disciplines include linguistics, archaeology, and history (specifically, the history of Israel). In terms of linguistics, Hebrew and Arabic serve as the primary source languages, while



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numerous other Semitic languages are also required as related linguistic tools. Biblical archaeology systematically presents data—both direct and indirect—pertaining to the historical events, institutions, and cultural contexts mentioned in the Bible; consequently, the history of Israel is reconstructed through the interpretation of both archaeological findings and textual records.

The Introduction offers a critical overview of scholarly achievements regarding the Old Testament as a whole; the General Section addresses the history of scholarship, the formation of the canon, and textual matters (including the history of the Hebrew text and various ancient translations), while the Specific Section discusses various theories concerning the content, sources, traditions, redactional processes, and theological concepts of each individual book of the Old Testament. Exegesis, presupposing this introductory knowledge, endeavors to establish the structure and meaning of the text by employing textual criticism to determine the definitive text, alongside source criticism, form criticism, tradition history, redaction-historical synthesis, and stylistic criticism. Theology, building upon the findings derived from these methods, provides a systematic exposition of the theological concepts found within the text. In the late 19th century, Julius Wellhausen—by reordering documentary sources through the lens of a developmental-historical perspective and reconstructing them as a history of Israelite religion—emerged as the foundational figure of Old Testament scholarship. Subsequently, beginning in the early 20th century, the "History of Religions School" rose to prominence as the mainstream approach; drawing upon the wealth of new materials discovered during that era, this school advocated for an organic understanding of the relationship between the Old Testament and its surrounding cultural and historical environment. Max Weber's **Ancient Judaism** elucidated the sociological structural interconnections within the text, while Gerhard von Rad's (1901–1971) **Old Testament Theology** and **Wisdom in Israel** systematically articulated the distinctive characteristics of Israelite thought, thereby establishing the intellectual framework for subsequent scholarly discourse.



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New Testament Studies

An overview of the contents of the Bible begins with the study of the language of the New Testament. The New Testament was written in Koine Greek—the common language of the Hellenistic world—by individuals who were profoundly influenced by the Hebrew tradition; consequently, it exhibits distinct semantic characteristics. Furthermore, the field encompasses textual criticism. In an era predating the printing press, documents were disseminated through manual transcription; however, this process often introduced errors or intentional emendations. Consequently, it became necessary to classify the lineages of these manuscripts and, by critically comparing the oldest and most reliable copies within each lineage, to reconstruct the original text. The *New Testament* itself consists of twenty-seven distinct documents—written individually across various locations spanning the eastern to northern regions of the Mediterranean cultural sphere between the mid-1st and early 2nd centuries—which were subsequently compiled and formally designated as the scriptural canon by the Church in a later era (specifically, the late 4th century).

New Testament Introduction (or *Isagogics*) examines each document individually, investigating who wrote it, when and where it was written, its specific purpose, the sources utilized, its content, its relationship to other documents, and the historical process through which it came to be included in the biblical canon. Exegesis involves the analysis and scrutiny of individual texts to elucidate the author's intended meaning within specific words, phrases, and sentences; it constitutes a central discipline that demands a comprehensive command of New Testament scholarship as a whole. New Testament Theology systematically articulates the conceptual



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content of the New Testament—specifically, how concepts such as God, Christ, humanity, history, sin, salvation, the Church, ethics, and eschatology are understood within its pages—and also incorporates critical reflection on the methodologies employed in New Testament interpretation. Furthermore, the field encompasses studies concerning the historical background of the New Testament, including the history of the Jewish people, Jewish life under Roman rule, and the influence of Jewish apocalyptic literature and Hellenistic religions on the New Testament (i.e., historical and religious studies). Additionally, key specialized areas of research include the reconstruction and interpretation of the words and deeds of Jesus (Jesus Studies) and the exposition of the life and thought of the Apostle Paul (Pauline Studies).

The History of Biblical Studies

Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791) investigated the historical process of the formation of the biblical canon and demonstrated that the Bible was not written all at once under divine inspiration. D.F. Strauss challenged the historicity of the supernatural miracles recounted in the Gospels; meanwhile, Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) analyzed the conflict between legalism and evangelicalism within the early church and debated which of the Pauline Epistles were genuinely authored by Paul. Heinrich Julius Holtzmann (1832–1910) refined the "Two-Source Hypothesis" (positing that Matthew and Luke utilized both the Gospel of Mark and the *Q* source—a collection of Jesus's sayings). Johannes Weiss (1863–1914) and Albert Schweitzer highlighted the influence of Jewish apocalyptic literature on the figure of Jesus, while Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920) emphasized the interconnections between the New Testament and various Hellenistic religions.



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Following World War II, form criticism revealed that the Gospels were constructed by compiling fragmentary oral traditions; subsequently, from the 1950s onward, redaction criticism sought to identify and analyze the editorial additions and theological perspectives of the individual Gospel writers. Rudolf Bultmann proposed an interpretive method—known as "demythologization"—aimed at clarifying the existential understanding underlying the mythological language of the Bible (specifically, the New Testament), thereby laying the foundational groundwork for the hermeneutics of New Testament theology within the field of biblical studies.

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