

NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY AND HISTORY INTERPRETATION ESSAY GUIDELINES

Ian W. Scott

OVERVIEW

Each student will write an essay **12-15 pages** in length offering an **interpretation of one passage** from a New Testament book. This interpretation should **follow all the steps of the interpretive method** with which we have worked in the course.

SELECTING A PASSAGE

- You are free to select **any passage you like within the NT**. Be aware that some passages are more difficult than others or have been the subject of extensive scholarly debate. This challenging passages can, though, be very rewarding to work with!
- In the **Gospels or Acts**, the passage should usually consist of **one complete pericope** (episode).
- In a **letter, homily**, or an extended **speech** in the Gospels or Acts, look for a **complete paragraph** (a section with a clear beginning and ending, which deals with one coherent topic or theme).
- **YOU MUST CONFIRM YOUR PASSAGE SELECTION WITH THE PROFESSOR BEFORE YOU BEGIN WORK ON THE ESSAY.**

FORMAT

- typed, **double spaced**
- **12pt** Times New Roman font, with margins of **1”**
- All references (footnotes, parenthetical references, bibliography) should follow the **SBL Handbook of Style**. A link to the SBL Handbook online is provided on the class web-site.
- **PLEASE USE FOOTNOTES (BOTTOM OF PAGE) OR PARENTHETICAL REFERENCES** rather than end-notes.
- You must include a **bibliography** at the end listing all the works cited in your paper.
- You **may use headings** and sub-headings in your essay if that is helpful, but these are not required.
- Please **do not leave a blank line between paragraphs**, but simply indent the first line of each new paragraph. A blank line is only necessary before headings.

RESEARCH

- Be sure to **use the interpretive process that I outline in the online textbook**.
- Remember that **research and writing are two separate steps**. You can't write a good, focused essay until *after* you have finished your research.

- **Begin by working through the steps for interpretation on your own**, drawing on what you have learned in readings and classes. Make your own observations about the passage.
- **After** that initial pass through the interpretive process, look at several scholarly sources to see **who might agree** with you, what **alternate points of view** you might need to interact with, and what **new ideas or observations** require some **re-thinking** of your interpretation.
- Remember that you **cannot include all the fruits of your research in the essay**. You will dig up a lot of information and make a lot of observations that are fascinating (even devotionally meaningful to you), but that do not relate to the central transformation you need to describe.

SAMPLE OUTLINE

In what follows I try to help you understand how to turn our method for interpretation into a well-structured essay. After your research is finished, you should largely be able to plug your results in under the appropriate headings and have the basis of a good essay. Just do not use this outline (particularly the detailed descriptions in the boxes) too woodenly—you still need to use some judgment to craft a logical and readable essay.

I. Introduction

- For a short essay like this your introduction should be just one short paragraph long (no more than half a page). Begin by introducing your passage and why it is important.
- The introduction should end with your thesis statement.
- This thesis statement should be two sentences:
 - 1) sum up in one sentence the transformation you are saying the passage was meant to provoke in the first century;
 - 2) sum up in a second sentence the analogous transformation it could prompt in your own life.

II. Body

a. Transforming the first-century audience

i. Who was the first-century audience?

- First describe the **general date, location, and social/historical situation** of the audience.
 - If there's some debate about the audience for your book, just acknowledge that debate (perhaps in a footnote) and choose a likely option as a working hypothesis.

ii. What was their starting state?

- If the NT book suggests a particular **crisis or event** that prompted its writing, describe that event.
- Personalize this situation by describing the (fictional but plausible) story of a **typical individual** in that audience

- Try to think too about what **daily life** would involve for members of this community and describe aspects of that daily life that will be relevant for describing her/his transformation.
- Feel free to use my description of a typical audience member if I've provided one for your book, but try to flesh out that description a bit.
- A good resource here is the *Dictionary of New Testament Background*.

iii. What strategies did the author use to move them?

- First offer a brief (usually one paragraph) **summary** of the contents of your passage
- Point out **specific features of the passage** that help us to understand its impact on the audience.
 - What is **emphasized**? What is the **focus**?
 - How does this passage fit into a **larger argument** being made in the surrounding passages?
 - How does this passage touch on **themes** that are prominent in the surrounding passages or in the whole book?
 - Does the passage allude to parts of **the OT story**? How does it relate that OT story to the audience's lives?
 - Does the passage allude to **historical events or cultural practices** that the audience would have known?
- This is also the place to talk about **relevant disagreements** between the interpreters you read in your research
 - Be sure to say **which interpretation you agree with** if it's important for your essay.
 - Also, be sure to **present evidence from the passage** to support your choice.

iv. What new state did the author try to move them toward?

- **What kind of changes** could the writer expect the passage to have on the audience?
 - How would the audience's **thinking** change?
 - How would the audience's **attitudes and feelings** change?
 - How would their **behaviour and habits** change?
- Again, **personalize** this change by describing how your **one member of the audience** would be transformed.
 - Make sure that you touch on **all three dimensions** of the change: thoughts, emotions, and behaviour.
 - Make sure that you **get specific** in describing these changes (especially changed behaviour)--**imagine an ordinary-life situation** and describe specifically how her/his actions would be different the next day after hearing the passage.
- Remember
 - We're assuming the author's **strategies are successful**-- Don't describe a bad reaction to the passage.
 - Focus on the audience's reaction to the **central features of**

the passage, i.e. the things that are emphasized in the passage itself.

- Don't try to describe the impact of the passage on *every* member of the audience. It's enough to focus on its impact for this one (albeit typical) member of that audience.

b. A Contemporary Transformation

- i. How is your own starting state analogous to that of the first century audience?

- Focus, again, on the typical individual you've imagined as a representative of the audience.
- Describe relevant **similarities and differences** between that individual and yourself.
 - Remember here that there are lots of comparisons you could make that don't help us to understand your application of the passage. Focus on what's significant.
- In light of these similarities and differences, **describe one specific situation** in your own life that is analogous to the specific situation you described for your typical audience member.
 - Point out **how this personal situation is similar** to the situation of that first-century audience member, as well as **how this personal situation is different**. The similarities should be clear and substantial.

- ii. What new state would be analogous to the new state of the first century audience?

- Given the analogy between these two situations, describe a **transformation in your own life that would be analogous** to the first-century transformation you described.
 - Again, **point out the similarities and differences** between this change in your own life and the change in your sample audience member's life.
 - **Resist, at this stage, reducing the passage to abstract principles**. First draw a concrete analogy between that ancient individual and your own life.
- Once you have described an analogous transformation in your own life, **then you can briefly outline any general principles** that we can draw from the passage's impact on these two specific individuals.

III. **Conclusion** (single paragraph beginning with re-worded thesis statement)

- For a short essay like this, the conclusion should be **one short paragraph**.
- The first sentence should be a **re-statement (in two sentences) of your thesis**. These should express the same ideas as you stated in the thesis statement at the end of your introduction, but should express those ideas in slightly different words.
- From there you can offer a couple of sentences about the

broader implications of your interpretation, other possible applications of the passage, questions that you couldn't answer in the essay, etc.

RESEARCH SOURCES

To gain full marks for the research portion of your grade, you should use the following range of research sources:

- **3 academic commentaries** on the book
 - These must be commentaries where a whole volume is devoted to your book (or at most 2 or 3 biblical books).
 - See the web-site for a list of good academic commentary series.
- **one article** in an academic **bible dictionary** or encyclopedia
 - **Do not** use popular-level dictionaries like the *Baker Bible Dictionary*.
 - **Do not** use Wikipedia or other resources that are not evaluated for accuracy before publication.
 - **Do** use
 - the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*,
 - the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (InterVarsity Press),
 - the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (InterVarsity Press),
 - the *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (InterVarsity Press), or
 - the *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (InterVarsity Press).
 - These are often the most difficult resources for people to access online. If you are nowhere near a theological library, consider purchasing one of the InterVarsity dictionaries listed above through an online bookseller—they are an excellent resource for all kinds of study in the future!
 - **Appropriate information** on your passage might come from dictionary or encyclopedia **entries on**
 - the book in which your passage is found,
 - a theological theme or motif found in your passage,
 - a person or group active in your passage,
 - some element of historical or cultural background to your passage,
 - an interpretive approach that yields fruitful insights about your passage, or
 - the city in which the audience of your passage lived.
- **one relevant academic journal article**
 - this can be found using the **ATLA journal database** through the Tyndale library's web-site. For those of you studying long-distance it is often possible to read journal articles full-text through the ATLA database record. Note that it is often most effective to search ATLA by **scripture reference** rather than by title;
 - some articles are available in full-text electronic form, but I would like you to use **at least one article from the paper journals** in the library;

- references to journal articles can also be found in the **footnotes and section bibliographies** of commentaries and dictionary articles.

SELF-CRITIQUE

Here are some **questions to ask yourself** as you write your essay and as you revise the finished product (notice that these correspond to the columns in my grading rubric):

Argument

- If I am interpreting a passage from the Gospels, does my contemporary analogy follow the same trajectory as the Gospel writer's interpretation of the events in Jesus' ministry?
- do I support my interpretation well with relevant and accurate evidence from the biblical text?
- where appropriate, do I support my interpretation well with relevant and accurate historical or cultural information?
- do I mention and respond to opposing interpretations of the passage?
- where appropriate, do I offer good reasons for rejecting opposing views?

Writing

- do I write with clear, grammatical English?
- is my spelling correct, even for unfamiliar words?
- do I lead the reader clearly through my argument, using summarizing statements to relate each main point to my thesis?
- does each paragraph and section have a clear point? Does the point change clearly as I move to the next section?
- do I use proper SBL referencing and bibliography format?

Research

- do I use all of the appropriate range of secondary sources?
- do I show a strong understanding of those sources?
- do I incorporate information or observations from them appropriately into my paper?
- do I include page numbers for all of my references to secondary sources?
- do I provide references not just for direct quotations, but also for any ideas or information drawn from your sources?
- do I integrate class material accurately and appropriately into my examination of the passage?

Insight and significance

- is my contemporary interpretation of the passage significant and relevant?
- do my argument and thesis show depth of insight into the passage and/or the methods of interpretation?
- does my argument show some degree of creative or independent thought?