A Short Guide to Writing Research Papers in Biblical Studies and Theology

The following notes and references are meant to help you to organize and compose a traditional academic research paper in biblical studies or related theological topics. You may find the basic sequence and resources helpful in other disciplines, too, especially in religious studies, philosophy, and historical studies. Short or long, your research paper can be crafted in five steps: *Contents*

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1. Choosing a Topic

Your topic may be chosen for you, but, if not, aim for one that is (1) interesting to you, (2) manageable (with readily available sources) and malleable (so you can narrow in on an especially interesting or important aspect), and (3) arguable. Your research paper will essentially be an argument based on the available primary and secondary sources and authorities. Specific topics might be suggested by points in the chapters of *Introducing the Old Testament*, by questions posed in your classroom, by the further readings, by your own religious or historical interests, or others. For example, in the area of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern studies, such topics as these might suggest themselves:

Historical significance of, and/or archaeological finds in, any of the following ancient cities:

Gezer

Hazor

Thebes

Ninevah

Ashkelon

Megiddoh

Theological message and historical significance of any of the following Deutero-canonical books:

Tobit

Judith

II Maccabbees

Asherah – role in Old Testament texts and/or a study of the archaeological evidence Significance of any of the following deities of the Ancient world and their influence on Israel:

Amun

Horus

Isis

Marduk

Ishtar

Family Life in ancient Israel

Israelite women and religious practice

Vegetation and diet in ancient Israel

Ancient Israel – Burial Practices

Ancient Israel – houses

Political nature of the Tribal League during the Time of the Judges

Solomon and the Wisdom Movement

The Solomonic temple -- its architecture, lay-out and importance of various areas

Music, dance and drama in Israelite worship

The purpose and types of sacrifice in ancient Israelite worship

The unnamed concubine and the civil war of *Judges 19-21*

Literary genres in the book of *Psalms* and the book's use in Israelite worship

Theological responses to the problem of suffering as presented in the book of *Job* or *Ecclesiastes* The visions of Jeremiah

The analogy of Hosea-Gomer to Yahweh-Israel: its importance for Israelite theology and its limitations

The book of Isaiah and complications of authorship
The post-exilic return to Jerusalem and ethnic tension
Hellenism and the Hasmoneans
Elephantine papyri
Amarna Letters
Lachish letters
Ashurbanipal and the ancient library at Ninevah
The Dead Sea Scrolls
Pottery of ancient Palestine
Sumerian Writing system
Process of mummification – Egypt
Old Testament figures – in artwork through the ages
Mathematics – Ancient Mesopotamia

Resources for Choosing a Topic and Beginning a Research Paper *Print resources:*

Badke, William B. *Research Strategies: Finding Your Way Through the Information Fog*, 3rd ed., NY: iUniverse, 2008.

Booth, Wayne, Gregory C. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Kennedy, J. *Library Research Guide to Religion and Theology: Illustrated Search Strategy and Sources.* 2d ed. Ann Arbor: Pieran, 1984.

Luey, Beth. *Handbook for Academic Authors*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Palmquist, Mike, *The Bedford Researcher*, 3rd ed., NY: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009.

Preece, Roy. Starting Research: An Introduction to Academic Research and Dissertation Writing. New York: St. Martin's, 1994.

Website:

http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/writersref6e/Player/Pages/Main.aspx

2. Researching Your Topic

Material about your topic may reside in a single text or in an array of texts by several authors or in the conflicting opinions of contemporary scholars. In most cases, you can build your research by moving from general to specific treatments of your topic.

One caution: In your research, it is vital that you not allow your growing knowledge of what others think about your topic to drown out your own curiosities, sensibilities, and insights. Instead, as your initial questions expand and then diminish with increased knowledge from your research, your own deeper concerns, insights, and point of view should emerge and grow.

A. Consult Standard Sources and Build Bibliography

Encyclopedia articles, biblical commentaries, theological dictionaries, concordances, and other standard reference tools contain a wealth of material-and helpful bibliographies-to orient you in your topic and its historical or theological context. Look for the best, most authoritative, and upto-date treatments. Checking cross-references will deepen your knowledge. Some of the most widely used resources, available in most college libraries, are:

Atlases and Tools:

Aharoni, Yohanan. The Macmillan Bible Atlas, 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1993.

Bahat, Dan. The Illustrated Atlas of Jerusalem, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990.

Danker, Frederick W. *Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study*, rev. and exp. ed., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

Pritchard, James B., ed. The Harper Atlas of the Bible, New York: Harper & Row, 1987.

Commentaries:

The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1994-2002. 12 vol.

Mays, James L., gen. ed., et al. Rev. ed. *Harper Collins Bible Commentary*, San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2000.

Newsom, Carol A. and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. *Women's Bible Commentary*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998.

Dictionaries:

Achtemeier, Paul J., gen. ed. et al. *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, et al., rev. ed. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996.

Botterweck, G. Johannes and Helmer Ringgren; Trans. John T. Willis. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Rev. ed. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977.

Freedman, David Noel, ed., et al, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, New York: Abingdon, 1962. 4 vols. with a supplement in 1976.

The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, gen. ed., et al. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006—.

Encyclopedias:

Bimson, John J. Baker Encyclopedia of Bible Places: Towns & Cities, Countries & States, Archaeology & Topography. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1995.

Eliade, Mircea, ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Mircea Eliade, ed., et al. 16 vols. New York: Macmillan, 1993.

Landman, Isaac, ed. *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia: An Authoritative and Popular Presentation of Jews and Judaism Since the Earliest Times.* New York: Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, 1948. 10 vols.

van der Woude, A. S., ed. *The World of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans. 1989.

Cross, F. L. and E. A. Livingstone, eds. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Wigoder, Geoffrey ed., et al. *New Encyclopedia of Judaism*. New York: New York University Press, 2002.

New Catholic Encyclopedia. Edited by the Catholic University of America. 18 vols. plus supplements. McGraw-Hill, 1967-.

Avi-Yonah, Michael, ed. *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975-1978. 4 vols.

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the New East, New York: Oxford University, 1997. 5 vol.

Online Resources:

Although not all Web sources meet scholarly standards, some very good theological reference tools do appear online. Some of them are collected or linked here:

"New Advent" Catholic Encyclopedia: http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/index.html

"Dictionary of Theology," from Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry: www.carm.org/dictionary.htm.

"Scholarly Collections" on the Web have been linked by Douglas E. Oakman at www.plu.edu/~oakmande

"Theologians," with links to biographies, bibliographies, and online writings: www.theology.ie/theologs.htm

"Theology and Religion Resources," a compendium of links to journals, bibliographies, and institutions, collected and reviewed by Alistair McGrath, Oxford University: www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk/religion.

It's wise to start listing the sources you've consulted right away in standard bibliographical format (see section 5, below, for examples of usual formats). Assigning a number to each one facilitates easy reference later in your work.

B. Check Periodical Literature

Even if you are writing on a single biblical or historical text, you'll be able to place your interpretation in contemporary context only by referring to what other scholars in this generation are saying. Their work is largely published in academic journals and periodicals. In consulting the chief articles dealing with your topic, you'll learn where agreements, disagreements, and open questions stand, how older treatments have fared, and the latest relevant tools and insights. Since you cannot consult them all, work back from the latest, looking for the best and most directly relevant articles from the last five, ten, or twenty years, as ambition and time allow. The place to start is the ATLA Religion Database, which indexes articles, essays, book reviews, dissertations, theses, and even essays in collections. You can search by keywords, subjects, persons, or scripture references. Other standard indexes to periodical literature, most in print but some now available on CD-ROM or on the Internet, include:

ATLA Religion database with ATLA Serials (as above)
Religion Index One/Two
Religious and Theological Abstracts
Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature (Net, CD)
Old Testament Abstracts, 1978—
Dissertation Abstracts International (Net, CD)
Humanities Index (Net, CD)

Online resources are less systematically available and up-to-date. But you can find links and some full articles and bibliographies online. One useful guide is:

"Wabash Center Guide to Internet Resources for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion":

www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/guide_headings.aspx

C. Research the Most Important Books and Primary Sources

By now you can also identify the most important books for your topic, both primary and secondary. Primary sources are actual historical sources that provide data for interpretation: the canonical Old Testament texts, the deutero-canonical texts, and extra-Biblical texts from the Ancient Near East. Secondary sources are all the articles or books that analyze or interpret primary sources. Your research topic might be in a single primary source, for example, the visions received by the Prophet Jeremiah, with countless secondary commentaries, analyses, or interpretations of those visions. Conversely, your primary resources may be vast—examples of types of religious practice or all the instances of a particular phrase or term in the Biblical texts—with hardly another researcher in sight who has cultivated expertise in or even expressed mild interest in your topic.

Apart from books you've identified through the other sources you've consulted, you can find the chief works on any topic readily listed in:

- Your college or university library's catalog
- The Library of Congress Subject Index at catalog.loc.gov.
- Other online library catalog sites. Many theological libraries and archives are linked at the "Religious Studies Web Guide": www.ucalgary.ca/~lipton/catalogues.html

Some of the best are:

- Blais: Online Catalog of the Libraries of the Claremont Colleges: blais.claremont.edu/search
- Yale University Divinity School Library: www.library.yale.edu/div/divhome.htm

The eventual quality of your research paper rests entirely on the quality or critical character of your sources. The best research uses academically sound treatments by recognized authorities arguing rigorously from primary sources.

D. Taking Notes

With these sources on hand—whether primary or secondary, whether in books or articles or Web sites or polling data—you can review each source, noting down its most important or relevant facts, observations, or opinions. Each point or cluster of points is put on a separate note card, keyed to a main bibliographical card for that source. As a memory aid for you, the main bibliographic card or entry for each source can also include a thumbnail sketch of its argument or import or point of view. Take notes only on the relevant portions of secondary sources, or you'll quickly be stoned to death with minutiae.

While students still use index cards to record their notes, a carefully constructed set of computer notes or files, retrievable by topic or source name or number, can be just as helpful. Either way—cards or computer—you'll need for each notable point to identify:

- the subtopic
- the source
- the main idea or quote

This practice will allow you to redistribute each card or point to wherever it is needed in your eventual outline.

E. Note or Ouote?

While most of the notes you take will simply summarize points made in primary or secondary sources, direct quotes are used for (1) word-for-word transcriptions, (2) key words or phrases coined by the author, or (3) especially clear or helpful or summary formulations of an author's point of view. Remember, re-presenting another's insight or formulation without attribution is plagiarism. You should also be sure to keep separate notes about your own ideas or insights into the topic as they evolve.

F. When Can I Stop?

As you research your topic in books, articles, or reference works, you will find it coalescing into a unified body of knowledge or at least into a set of interrelated questions. In most cases, your topic will become more and more focused, partly because that is where the open question or key insight or most illuminating instance resides, and partly for sheer manageability. The vast range of scholarly methods and opinions and sharply differing points of view about most theological topics (especially in the contemporary period) may force you to settle for laying out a more circumscribed topic carefully. While the sources may never dry up, your increased knowledge gradually gives you confidence that you have the most informed, authoritative, and critical sources covered in your notes.

3. Outlining Your Argument

On the basis of your research findings, in this crucial step you refine or reformulate your general topic and question into a specific question answered by a defensible thesis or hypothesis. You then arrange or rework your supporting materials into a clear outline that will coherently and convincingly present your thesis to your reader.

First, review your research notes carefully. Some of what you initially read now seems obvious or irrelevant, or perhaps the whole topic is simply too massive. But, as your reading and note-taking progressed, you might also have found a piece of your topic, from which a key question or problem has emerged and around which your research has gelled. Ask yourself:

- What is the subtopic or sub-question that is most interesting, enlightening, and manageable?
- What have been the most clarifying and illuminating insights I have found on the topic?
- In what ways have my findings contradicted my initial expectations? Can this serve as a clue to a new and different approach to my question?
- Can I frame my question in a clear way, and, in light of my research, do I have something new to say and defend—my thesis or hypothesis—that will answer my question and clarify my materials?

In this way you will advance from topic and initial question to specific question and thesis. For example, as you research primary and secondary sources on the tale of the unnamed concubine in *Judges* 19, you might conclude that the story and the civil war that follows serve a broader editorial purpose in the Biblical text than that usually given -- that the chaos points toward Israel's need for a king. So you have:

- Topic: The unnamed concubine and the civil war of *Judges* 19-21
- Specific question: What was the editor's purpose for ending the book of Judges with such a brutal tale followed by a civil war?
- Thesis: The brutal story of the Levite and the unnamed concubine served not only to point toward Israel's critical need for a king at the end of the settlement period, but also to foreshadow the message of the prophets who repeatedly warned leaders against injustice and abuse of the lowly.

You can then outline a presentation of your thesis that marshals your research materials into an orderly and convincing argument. Functionally your outline might look like this:

- 1. Introduction. Raise the key question and announce your thesis.
- 2. Background. Present the necessary literary or historical or theological context of the question. Note the "state of the question" or the main agreements and disagreements about it.

- 3. Development. Present your own insight in a clear and logical way. Marshal evidence to support your thesis and develop it further by:
- offering examples from your primary sources
- citing or discussing authorities to bolster your argument
- contrasting your thesis with other treatments, either historical or contemporary
- confirming it by showing how it makes good sense of the data or answers related questions or solves previous puzzles.
- 4. Conclusion. Restate the thesis in a way that recapitulates your argument and its consequences for the field or the contemporary religious horizon.

The more detailed your outline, the easier will be your writing. Go through your cards, reorganizing them according to your outline. Fill in the outline with the specifics from your research, right down to the topic sentences of your paragraphs. Don't be shy about setting aside any materials that now seem off-point, extraneous, or superfluous to the development of your argument.

4. Writing Your Paper

You are now ready to draft your paper, essentially by putting your outline into sentence form while incorporating specifics from your research notes.

Your main task, initially, is just to get it down on paper in as straightforward a way as possible. Assume your reader is intelligent but knows little or nothing about your particular topic. You can follow your outline closely, but you may find that logical presentation of your argument requires adjusting the outline somewhat. As you write, weave in quotes judiciously from primary or secondary literature to clarify or punch your points. Add brief, strong headings at major junctures. Add footnotes to acknowledge ideas, attribute quotations, reinforce your key points through authorities, or refer the reader to further discussion or resources. Your draft footnotes might refer to your sources as abbreviated in source cards, with page numbers; you can add full publishing data once your text is firm.

5. Reworking Your Draft

Your rough draft puts you within sight of your goal, but your project's real strength emerges from reworking your initial text in a series of revisions and refinements. In this final phase, make frequent use of one of the many excellent style manuals available for help with grammar, punctuation, footnote form, abbreviations, etc.:

Gibaldi, Joseph, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 4th ed. New York: Modern Language Association, 1995.

The Chicago Manual of Style, 16th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Turabian, Kate L. A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, 7th ed. Rev. by Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb and Joseph Williams, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Alexander, Patrick H., et al., eds. *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies.* Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999.

Online:

Diana Hacker: A Writer's Reference:

http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/writersref6e/Player/Pages/Main.aspx

Closely examine your work several times, paying attention to:

- 1. Structure and Argument. Do I state my question and thesis accurately? Does my paper do what my Introduction promised? (If not, adjust one or the other.) Do I argue my thesis well? Do the headings clearly guide the reader through my outline and argument? Does this sequence of topics orchestrate the insights my reader needs to understand my thesis?
- 2. *Style*. Style here refers to writing patterns that enliven prose and engage the reader. Three simple ways to strengthen your academic prose are:
- Topic sentences. Be sure each paragraph clearly states its main assertion.
- Active verbs. As much as possible, avoid using the linking verb, to be. Rephrase using active verbs.
- Sentence flow. Above all, look for awkward sentences in your draft. Disentangle and rework them into smooth, clear sequences. To avoid boring the reader, vary the length and form of your sentences. Check to see if your paragraphs unfold with some short sentences, questions, and simple declarative ones.

Likewise, tackle some barbarisms that frequently invade academic prose:

- Repetition. Unless you need the word count, this can go.
- Unnecessary words. Need we say more? Such filler as *The fact that* and *in order to* and *There is/are* numb your reader. Similarly, such qualifiers as somewhat, *fairly, rather, very,* take the wind from the adjective that follows.
- Jargon. Avoid technical terms when possible. Explain all technical terms that you do use. Avoid or translate foreign-language terms.
- Overly complex sentences. Short sentences are best. Avoid compound-complex sentences and run-on sentences. Avoid *etc*.
- 3. Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation. Along with typographical errors, look for stealth errors, the common but overlooked grammatical gaffes: subject-verb disagreement, dangling participles, mixed verb tenses, over- and under-use of commas, semicolon use, and inconsistency in capitalization, hyphenation, italicization, or treatment of numbers. Miriam-Webster Online contains both the *Collegiate Dictionary* and *Thesaurus*: www.m-w.com/.
- 4. Footnotes. Your footnotes will give credit to your sources for every quote and for other people's ideas you have used. Here are samples of typical citation formats in Modern Language Association style:

Basic order:

Author's full name, Book Title, ed., trans., series, edition, vol. number (Place: Publisher, year), pages.

Book:

Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2001), 114.

Book in a series:

Carol Meyers, *Households and Holiness: the Religious Culture of Israelite Women*, Facets series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

Edited book:

Kristen E. Kwam, Linda S. Schearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler, eds., *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 129-55.

Essay or chapter in an edited book:

Susan Niditch, "Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael," *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, Peggy L. Day, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 43-57.

Multi-volume work:

Emil Schurer, "The Times of Judas Maccabaeus, B.C. 165-161," *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, vol. 1 (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1994), 219.

Journal article: David Shepherd, "Violence in the Fields? Translating, Reading, and Revising in Ruth 2." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63 (2001): 444-63.

Encyclopedia article:

Joel C. Slayton, "Manna," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 511.

Unsigned encyclopedia article:

"Tyre," Encarta 98 Encyclopedia, CD ROM (Microsoft Systems, 1998).

Website source:

Teresa J. Hornsby, "Israel Has Become A Worthless Thing: Re-reading Gomer In Hosea 1-3," *JSOT* 82: 115-28.

For a full listing of citation styles for internet sources, see "Citation Style": www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/citex.html.

CD-ROM source:

Helmar Junghans, *Martin Luther: Exploring His Life and Times*, 1483–1546, CD ROM (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

Bible:

Cite in your text (not in your footnotes) by book, chapter, and verse: Gen 1:1-2; Exod 7:13; Rom 5:1-8. In your bibliography list the version of Bible you have used.

Repeated citations:

If a footnote cites the immediately preceding source, use ibidem, meaning "there," abbreviated: 61. Ibid., 39.

Sources cited earlier can be referred to by author or editor's names, a shorter title, and page number:

- 62. Koester, Introduction, 42.
- 5. Bibliography. Your bibliography can be any of several types:
- Works Cited: just the works-books, articles, etc.-that appear in your footnotes
- Works Consulted: all the works you checked in your research, whether they were cited or not in the final draft
- Select Bibliography: primary and secondary works that, in your judgment, are the most important source materials on this topic, whether cited or not in your footnotes.

Some teachers might ask for your bibliographic entries to be annotated, i.e., to include a comment from you on the content, import, approach, and helpfulness of each work.

Bibliographic style differs somewhat from footnote style. Here are samples of typical bibliographic formats *in MLA style*:

Basic order: Author's last name, first name and initial. Book Title. Ed. Trans. Series. Edition. Vol. Place: Publisher, Year.

Book:

Heschel, Abraham J. *The Prophets*. Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2001.

Book in a series:

Meyers, Carol. *Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture of Israelite Women*. Facets Series. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

Edited book:

Kwam, Kristen E., Linda S. Schearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler, eds. *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Essay or chapter in an edited book:

Niditch, Susan. "Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael." In *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*. Ed. Peggy L. Day. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989.

Multi-volume work:

Schurer, Emil. "The Times of Judas Maccabaeus, B.C. 165-161." In *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, vol. 1. Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1994.

Journal article:

David Shepherd, "Violence in the Fields? Translating, Reading, and Revising in Ruth 2." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63 (2001), 444-63.

Encyclopedia article:

Slayton, Joel C. "Manna." *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Ed. David Noel Freedman. Vol. 4. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Unsigned encyclopedia article:

"Tyre." Encarta 98 Encyclopedia. CD ROM. Microsoft Systems, 1998.

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For a full listing of citation styles for internet sources, see "Citation Style": www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/citex.htm.

CD ROM source:

Helmar Junghans. *Martin Luther: Exploring His Life and Times, 1483-1546.* CD-ROM. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

After incorporating the revisions and refinements into your paper, print out a fresh copy, proofread it carefully, make final corrections, format it to your teacher's or institution's specifications, and print your final paper.