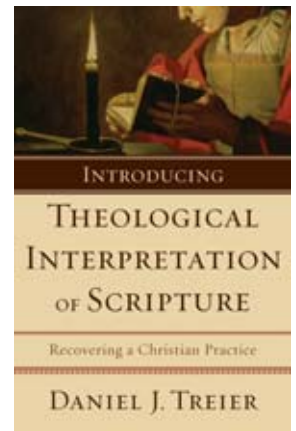


# Interview with Daniel J. Treier

author of *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*



**E-Notes:** Why was the time right for an introduction to theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS)? What gap in the field did you seek to fill?

**DT:** Literature flying this flag is now just over ten years old. Enough people, church traditions, and varying approaches have gotten involved to make the field both complex and interesting. I found that I needed to sit down and draw a map for myself—both as a teacher of hermeneutics classes and as a person involved in the literature itself. I needed answers for the frequent questions I was getting about what TIS really means and how different theorists relate to each other. That mapping exercise eventually turned into this book—at least once Mark Noll told me to write it.

**E-Notes:** Since your work is the first systematic introduction to TIS for students and nonspecialists did you find the task especially daunting?

**DT:** The most daunting part of the project was the need to write clearly about complex ideas. In some cases we write clearly by leaving out complexity, but debates about TIS require facing the complexity head-on and making sense of it. Writing the first introduction for the uninitiated was in one respect easier because I was free to make up my own mind, rather than primarily writing at a secondary remove about the introductions of others. Thus I could dive into, say, interchanges between Fowl and Vanhoozer without worrying too much over secondary literature about those interchanges.

**E-Notes:** What reader did you have in mind as you wrote this book? How do you envision the text being used in the classroom?

**DT:** I had several audiences in mind at once. First and foremost, I suppose, is the interested biblical scholar who reads little hermeneutics literature and does so suspiciously—and who wonders what all the TIS hubbub is about. Second, pastors and students in hermeneutics courses also need to gain understanding and reach decisions about the appropriate use or nonuse of critical scholarship vis-à-vis churchly concerns. Third, I was also very conscious of each of the major players in the TIS movement: if so-and-so read my book, would they find the portrayal of their work to be fair in the details and my portrayal of the movement overall to be balanced and winsome?

**E-Notes:** Given that the concerns of theological interpretation are of interest to mainline, evangelical, and Catholic scholars, describe the ecumenical possibilities you see in the rebirth of TIS.

**DT:** As I note in the book, I experienced these ecumenical possibilities myself in the course of writing. Steve Fowl, an Episcopalian, and Matthew Levering, a Roman Catholic, were exceedingly generous with their time and gracious in their comments. So it was a blessing to gain new friends in various church communions as a result of this project. At the same time, I gained fresh appreciation for ecclesiastical particularity and how it affects our hermeneutical instincts. As a result, I also came to see my own evangelical heritage differently, appreciating how some of its popular practices—purged of occasional fundamentalism—in fact have uniquely perpetuated elements of TIS. The overall lesson seems to be that ecumenism, when it comes

to meaningful fellowship and collaboration, happens best when people are serious about their convictions along with the pursuit of unity where possible.

**E-Notes:** You note in the book that the recovery of theological exegesis is a conversation largely limited to the academy. Why do you think this conversation is also important for the church? Is theological interpretation's importance for the church different from that of other disciplines, such as biblical and theological studies?

**DT:** I hope that the recent attention to the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* and other works from Kevin Vanhoozer and Tom Wright will foster increasing pastoral and lay interest in this conversation. Early on, a fair bit of the theorizing went on in mainline Protestant or British circles, where it seemed as if its churchly impact was going to bypass much of popular American Christianity and where appeals to "the church" also seemed a bit theologically abstract. Yet American evangelical Christianity, for all its concrete attention to the Bible in the work of ministry, needs this material to prod it toward greater attention to churchly context—public reading of Scripture, sacraments, and so on. One could see TIS as a matter of scholars gaining renewed interest in the endgame of biblical interpretation, whether it be preaching or some other churchly task, and refusing to separate this endgame from the rest of the process. Thus I would hope that TIS could offer a language to bring church and academy closer together in some ways.

**E-Notes:** Describe how and why you weave a case study on the image of God throughout the book.

**DT:** Brian Bolger, my editor, and I discussed whether to use situation-specific examples or an extended case study. In the end we did a bit of both. There needed to be a case study for the sake of continuity, to show how TIS might make a difference for various types of interpretative decisions on a common subject, since much TIS literature uses case studies only in one area or on a given point rather than synthetically. The image of God had cropped up in Francis Watson's writing and offered a nice set of problems (if I dare to say that) because of how it appears in both the Old and New Testaments. It is a doctrine on which much of the recent churchly or theological work and much of the recent biblical work conflict rather sharply.

**E-Notes:** Your book is divided into two parts. In the first you explore the catalysts and themes practitioners of TIS hold in common. In the second you discuss continuing challenges facing TIS. Why did you approach the topic in this fashion?

**DT:** Again, I was trying to draw a map for myself first of all, and these were the two questions that naturally suggested themselves in laying out the territory. People wanted to know why, if I disagreed with a particular thinker on a certain point, I would still associate with the vocabulary of TIS. That supported a strategy of naming the themes to celebrate and then narrating the arguments that are ongoing.

**E-Notes:** One of the continuing points of controversy you describe is the place of global Christianity. The importance of global or world Christianity will likely affect Christian academics across the board. What are some of the special considerations for TIS?

**DT:** This was the only chapter of the book that required substantial "fresh research" beyond the knowledge of TIS that I had already acquired via my dissertation and my work on the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. Many of us have only become seriously attuned to global Christianity within the last five or ten years, so it was intimidating enough to write about that apart from the hermeneutical particularities unique to TIS. My impression is that most TIS literature ignores global Christianity out of preoccupation with a set of problems associated with the Western university and biblical criticism's place therein. Yet we can't get away with this ignorance for long. The appeal of TIS advocates to the early church has some natural points of synergy with attention to global Christianity, as Thomas Oden and others are demonstrating.

What proves complex about this conversation for me is the need for ideological criticism to cut several ways at once. As I try to show, some postcolonial thought is savage toward Pentecostal Christianity, even or especially among the poor in the global South. Thus even the most circumspect theory, at least as advertised, comes loaded with ideological baggage. At the same time, American evangelicals are tempted to claim global South Christianity for their own and to celebrate uncritically everything about it because it is growing. That would be profound irony, to valorize ideologies that we take to be friendly simply on the grounds of pragmatism—since equating “whatever works” with God’s blessing may be our culture’s favorite, perhaps homegrown ideology. So I see global Christianity as a challenge and opportunity largely unaddressed by TIS at this stage. My chapter on it will not provide full theoretical resolution but may at least nag people to pay more careful attention and introduce them to some resources.

**E-Notes:** Your footnotes frequently cite articles from the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible (DTIB)*. How do you see your book complementing the *DTIB* and how might the two books be used in tandem?

**DT:** The *DTIB* tries—imperfectly but fairly successfully—to represent the breadth of the TIS movement in both the various approaches to articles and the content itself. In some respects my goal is similar, since I am trying primarily to be descriptive in representing TIS rather than prescriptive about my own configuration of biblical interpretation. I found *DTIB* articles to be enormously helpful in representing the landscape of approaches and in offering students a point of departure, especially when it comes to bibliography on various subjects. Much of *DTIB* is one step closer to the actual practice of biblical interpretation and the content of Scripture. What *ITIS* gives by contrast is subtext: what’s going on when the *DTIB* article “Intention, Intentional Fallacy” is written by Vanhoozer or “Virtue” by Fowl? *ITIS* can take certain subjects that are compressed in *DTIB* and give a fuller sense of context regarding those discussions or who the major players are behind the scenes. Moreover, *ITIS* explains historically how it is that a book such as *DTIB*, with its varied cast of characters, came into being.