

INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that the evangelical scholarly world has become increasingly interested in the hermeneutical method known as theological interpretation of Scripture (or TIS), with Stephen Fowl, Daniel Treier, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson leading the way. Unfortunately, confusion has often grown alongside of interest. Many works on TIS are theoretical, scholarly, or too massive for those who are not experts to grasp the concept. In response, this paper intends to accomplish two things: first, to inform those not in the discussion as to the practical nature of TIS and, second, to provide a rough working model of TIS for teachers and pastors who are interested. In order to reach these goals, I will first briefly explain what TIS means and does not mean for this attempt. Then, for the majority of our time, I will present a case study on 1 Thess 4:13–18. In line with the goals of the project, I am making no attempt to exegete this pericope in a complete manner. Instead, and in line with the conference theme, I will endeavor to illustrate one form that theological interpretation of Scripture could take for a teacher or pastor who has no time for a lengthy project each time he or she speaks. First of all, however, definitions require our attention.

HOW THEN SHOULD WE READ: DEFINITIONS

Theological interpretation of Scripture takes seriously the claims that God is the author of the Scriptures (2 Tim 3:16) and that the subject matter of these revelations is Jesus the Messiah (Luke 24:27; John 5:39). If this is the case, there is an essential unity to the Scriptures that should affect the exegetical practice. Because of this, TIS attempts to restore pieces of the full exegetical

process that have been lost. This restoration is not an attempt to return to the premodern period, which is impossible. Instead, the goal is to create wholeness by integrating as many robust methods and practices as possible. Exegesis should be thick, not thin. This contrast can be outlined in three main areas: author, text, and reader. As an exegesis student, I will use traditional grammatical-historical exegesis as a starting point to clarify the issues.

Author

In the sphere of the author, grammatical-historical exegesis focuses upon the human writer. For many, the only way to hear God speak is to listen to the human speech found in the text.¹ As deconstructionism has so well pointed out, however, human authors are subject to the language system, not in power over it.² Even philosophers such as Paul Ricœur, who some believe rescued meaning from the clutches of the deconstructionists, negate the author in favor of the text alone.³ Thus, emphasis upon the human author alone is not philosophically viable. In addition, it leads to fragmentation such as the emphasis upon Old and New Testament biblical theologies and the loss of systematic theology in exegesis. After all, if the human authors are the

¹ Mark Alan Bowald, *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics: Mapping Divine and Human Agency* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 13, attributes this to a hesitancy to use operational judgments for transcendentals, which only properly appear in the sphere of notional judgments. He suggests that this stems from Kantian philosophy. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. Werner S. Pluhar; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 310–311, who indeed argues that “the pure categories can *never* be of *transcendental* but always only of *empirical* use” (*italics his*).

² See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 158. Khiok-Khng Yeo has realized this and argued that authors have no control over the continued meaning of their work. See Yeo, “Culture and Intersubjectivity as Criteria for Negotiating Meanings in Cross-Cultural Interpretations,” in *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy and the Conflict of Interpretations* (ed. Charles H. Cosgrove; New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 87.

³ See Paul Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 92.

only way to the divine meaning, one cannot expect a system to flow naturally from this multitude of voices. TIS seeks to heal these divisions in exegesis by emphasizing the priority of the divine author in addition to the human author. Kevin Vanhoozer helpfully points to the Reformed doctrine of Christ's presence in the Eucharist to illustrate this point: Christ is spiritually present in the physical elements, and the believer communes with him. In the same way, God as author is spiritually present in physical texts, and we commune with him as author.⁴ This has ongoing effects for the other two spheres.

Text

In the sphere of the text, grammatical-historical exegesis often understands the written word as a record of past speech.⁵ Exegetes must “uncover” the truths “encased” in the Scriptures.⁶ The text is the human author's intention inscribed, and its purpose is to lead us beyond itself to that intention. Unfortunately, deconstructionism again problematizes this understanding of texts since signs cannot reliably point to externals, and, as relevance theory points out, their meanings are based upon contextual clues.⁷ In other words, language alone cannot be relied upon to communicate absolute truth, as grammatical-historical exegesis wants it to do. In response, TIS again posits a divine author. While human authors are trapped by the

⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 240.

⁵ Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 14.

⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 23–24.

⁷ Derrida and Spivak, *Of Grammatology*, 158. In line with this, Gene L. Green, “Lexical Pragmatics and the Lexicon,” *BBR* 22.3 (2012): 323, argues that signs cannot be understood properly apart from their textual context.

language system and are unable to make it mean, the God who created language can indeed speak in a way that transcends the web of signs. Since a timeless God speaks in the text, it is not simply a record of past speech but contains the ongoing communication of God to his people throughout history.

Reader

This leads us to the third sphere, which addresses both audience and context since the “reader” in the tripartite model refers to both. In grammatical-historical exegesis, the exegete studies backgrounds so as to “avoid erroneous conclusions,” as the preface to the *IVP Bible Background Commentary on the Old Testament* puts it, especially conclusions stemming solely from one’s own worldview and context.⁸ The goal is to efface oneself and read like an Israelite or Greco-Roman. Unfortunately, as someone once said, “A book is a mirror. If an ass peers into it, you can’t expect an apostle to look out.”⁹ One cannot get past one’s own perspective, reading ability, and culture.¹⁰ The plane of the reader need not be so bleak as that, however. Although exegetes will never be able to completely inhabit another culture or time period, it is possible to experience them to some degree. Even more importantly, however, the divine author of Scripture did not speak simply for the sake of the current audience. God has invited us to know him by pulling us into his story, and we are a part of it just like the Israelites and the early church. This

⁸ John H. Walton, Victor Harold Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 7.

⁹ Attributed to G. C. Lichtenberg in Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 164.

¹⁰ This understanding can be linked to the concept of “dasein” in Heidegger in that “fundamental ontology” must be sought in the “existential analysis of Da-sein” (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein Und Zeit* (trans. Joan Stambaugh; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 11). Dasein is concerned with its own existence most primarily, and personal ontology is prior to all other ontologies.

understanding requires what Matthew Levering calls a “participatory” theory of history, which emphasizes both the linear and the vertical.¹¹ In the end, if all things really do consist in Christ, he is the ultimate context, and knowing him is the best way to comprehend both Testaments.

Theoretical Results

When one accepts an immanent divine author, the continuing speech of the text, and the role of the people of God throughout history as readers, the nature of the game shifts. Modern exegetes need to be interpreters, just as they have always strived to be, but interpretation must take a different form. J. R. R. Tolkien, in his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” provides a useful term for conceptualizing this interpretive work: sub-creation. Sub-creators are humans who do not have the power to create reality as God does, but who desire their creations, especially their stories, to conform to reality in some way.¹² In line with this, exegetes and theologians must be aware of the larger story and fit what they do into it. If God is the author and Jesus is the subject matter, and if all things consist in Christ and were created by God, then all things are relevant to the interpretation of the text, and the text has a unity within itself and, somehow, with the rest of the world.¹³ Because of this, we should use everything at our disposal to interpret the text.¹⁴

¹¹ Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 5.

¹² J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” in *A Tolkien Miscellany* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 137–138.

¹³ For instance, both the contexts of the modern and the ancient world are important as Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Ascending the Mountain, Singing the Rock: Biblical Interpretation Earthed, Typed, and Transfigured,” *MT* 28.4 (October 2012): 792–793, points out.

¹⁴ For a good example of how this can work in the realm of science, see Thomas F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 41–48. He relates physics to the incarnation.

Criticisms

As might be expected, scholarly response to this hermeneutic has been very mixed. While many express cautious interest in the recovery of theology and the role of the Holy Spirit, they fear that TIS will lead interpreters away from the transformative meaning of the Scriptures. Nathaniel Sutanto provides a good example of this fear. While he acknowledges the basic evangelical friendliness of Francis Watson's work, he also suggests that his version of TIS will "inevitably lead to the subordination of the text to subjective preferences and a subjective 'gospel.'"¹⁵ Charlie Trimm, in an article in *BBR*, agrees that many aspects of TIS are valuable, but he worries that focus on preexisting theology will preclude corrections to that theology, that emphasis on the unity of Scripture will negate the testimony of individual books, and that the downplaying of historical criticism will ignore the historical nature of the Christian faith.¹⁶

These two articles illustrate the most common evangelical reasons for rejecting TIS: the controls for remaining faithful to the text are allegedly weak, and ignoring years of critical scholarship appears to be too easy. Thus, the most common difficulties are not methodological but practical. Can TIS integrate critical scholarship responsibly and stay true to the text as it follows its own distinctives? I believe that it can. TIS does not negate critical scholarship or the priority of the text, but instead makes an effort to integrate these concerns into a larger practice. In the end, however, these practical concerns can only be answered by a case study. Thus, I will list some practicalities that flow from TIS and then present my case study on 1 Thess 4:13–18.

¹⁵ Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, "On the Theological Interpretation of Scripture: The Indirect Identity Thesis, Reformed Orthodoxy, and Trinitarian Considerations," *WTJ* 77.2 (September 2015): 351.

¹⁶ Charlie Trimm, "Evangelicals, Theology, and Biblical Interpretation: Reflections on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture," *BBR* 20.3 (2010): 315–319.

Practical Results

The following is a non-exhaustive list of some practices that TIS requires. First of all, according to Paul, only those truly living in faith are renewed in their minds and able to interpret properly, so we as exegetes must be living in faith.¹⁷ Second, we must simply read the Bible over and over so that we will be shaped by its story. If Christ is the primary context of the text, only by encountering Christ as the Word can we understand the word. Third, exegetes should make an effort to understand theology and theologians should attempt to understand grammatical-historical exegesis. Fourth, when performing grammatical-historical exegesis, exegetes must relate the results to the whole in the end.¹⁸ Fifth, all should pursue what Vanhoozer calls a “hermeneutics of humility *and* conviction.”¹⁹ Both a striving for the truth that exists and an understanding that final truth is impossible before the eschaton are essential. Finally, we need to realize that we cannot do it all on our own. We must rely on the believing and interpreting community throughout history and the world.²⁰ In the end, the goal is to become a good reader of the Scriptures. All our methods and studies have one purpose: when we read the text, we should encounter God’s communication and be changed in such a way that our sub-creations conform to his grand design.

¹⁷ Especially see Romans 1–2.

¹⁸ G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 25, calls this “contextual exegesis.” This may include “allegory.” As Vanhoozer, “Ascending the Mountain, Singing the Rock,” 789, points out, however, this is tracing trajectories, not creating inventories.

¹⁹ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 466. Italics his.

²⁰ See Gene L. Green, “The Challenge of Global Hermeneutics,” in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission* (ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 50–66.

READING A PASSAGE: 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13–18

If theological interpretation of Scripture requires constant reading, systematic theology, historical theology, and complete grammatical-historical exegesis, how can anyone complete such a task? One key is the last point above: we must rely upon the community. The task may still seem hazy or impossible, however, so it is time for a case study in TIS on 1 Thess 4:13–18. I will make no attempt to provide an ETS-caliber exegesis paper on the passage. Instead, my goal is to present an example of how to theologically interpret. Although there is no strict order of methods in theological interpretation, and indeed there are more methods than these, I will present a possible incarnation of the model by organizing my case study in this way: 1) my own theological starting points, 2) previous interpretations of the text, 3) background studies, 4) grammatical and linguistic analysis, 5) canonical reading, 6) theological conclusions, and 7) application. Again, the goal is to provide a clear and feasible working model for TIS so that the perspective is both understandable and achievable.

Dasein's Theology: Presuppositions

First of all, then, are my own presuppositions. I am a modern evangelical who believes in the inerrancy of Scripture and the truthfulness of the text. For my purposes here, however, the specific theological details of interest are my eschatological beliefs. I am amillennial, and I believe that Jesus could return at any moment, ending the last days in which we live. Both the wicked and the righteous, the dead and the living, will be raised at the same time, judged at the same time, and go to their eternal “homes.” I am suspicious of any detailed timeline for the end times except the sequence of Jesus’ return followed by the judgment. Because of all this, I do not expect to glean exact details about how or when Christ’s return will take place from a text like this one. Quite obviously, this established theology will greatly affect my reading.

Reading With the Ancients: Prior Interpretations

After dealing with presuppositions, we will move on to the history of interpretation. For this step, the pastor or teacher can turn to the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* for the views of the church fathers.²¹ Important observations from these early figures will help to structure and contain the rest of the steps to follow.

In the fathers, there are four main themes that help to structure ongoing research and thoughts. First is the question of the point of the pericope. Chrysostom argues that it is to comfort those who are grieving so that they do not grieve like those who reject resurrection.²² Augustine agrees, suggesting that the issue is not grief as such but pagan grief.²³ Second, the fathers consistently discuss what the terminology of “sleep” means. Chrysostom claims that Christ’s death and resurrection abolished the reality and even the terminology of death, and Jerome agrees.²⁴ On the other hand, Augustine denies that any change in the reality of death is indicated but instead interprets “sleep” simply as a euphemistic reference to death.²⁵

Third, the fathers emphasize Christ as forerunner in resurrection. Gregory of Nyssa points out that, as Christ rose with God as his Father, so we also will rise with God as our Father.²⁶ Rufinus of Aquileia agrees that human bodies will be raised into the air because Christ’s

²¹ Calvin’s and Luther’s commentaries are also helpful.

²² Peter Gorday and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (ACCS IX; Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 84.

²³ Ibid., 85.

²⁴ Ibid., 87.

²⁵ Ibid., 83.

²⁶ Ibid., 89.

resurrection body was.²⁷ Fourth and finally, Chrysostom addresses meeting with Christ in the air, arguing that we will be raised in the air to meet Christ as he descends. This is an honor, for those who are honored citizens go out to meet the king when he comes into the city.²⁸ These four trajectories will generally direct the thread of the following work.

Cultural Encyclopedia: Background of the Text

With my own theology and a brief survey of patristic theology behind, we can now approach the historical and cultural background of the passage. The pastor or teacher here will most likely rely upon background commentaries such as Keener's or Arnold's. Several pieces of information found in these commentaries illuminate our trajectories. First, philosophers often wrote letters of consolation, charging their recipients not to grieve because it would do no good. These letters regularly ended with commands to comfort one another.²⁹ Pagans, however, generally believed in "a shadowy afterlife in the underworld" and were not very optimistic about death.³⁰ A grave inscription from Thessalonica backs up this claim: the greatest hope after death was to have a place to rest with one's family.³¹ The patristic argument that the pericope is about improper grief fits these details. Second, supporting Chrysostom's argument for an embassy going out to meet the king, Keener points out that the word for "meeting" in the pericope (ἀπάντησις) was often used in the Greco-Roman world of dignitary escorts who would go out to

²⁷ Gorday and Oden, *1–2 Thessalonians*, 89–90.

²⁸ Ibid., 90.

²⁹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 592–593.

³⁰ Ibid., 592.

³¹ Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 3: 422.

meet and accompany a ruler visiting a city.³² Finally, in contrast to the weight given to the term “sleep” in Chrysostom and Jerome, it was apparently a very common metaphor for death in the first century, which fits more with Augustine.³³

Home Turf: Lexical Issues and Linguistics

From backgrounds we move on to lexical-semantics and linguistics, where, as an exegete, I can contribute to the larger discussion. Similarly, TIS encourages pastors and teachers to discover their talent and perform that step on their own. Therefore, my own findings follow. First of all, Paul starts off his section with a disclosure formula, which, when used with a vocative, often introduces a new subject.³⁴ The purpose for introducing this subject is given by ἵνα μὴ λυπησθε. The καθὼς clause following supports the ideas of Augustine and Chrysostom that the issue is a certain type of grief, not the grieving itself.³⁵ The phrase “those who have no hope” is especially evocative in light of the Greco-Roman world’s bleak picture of death and afterlife.

In verse 14, a word order analysis following principles developed by Stephen Levinsohn clarifies what Paul intends to say.³⁶ The basic principles are these: Greek is verb-initial by default, and any constituent that does not normally precede the verb is placed there either as a

³² Keener, *Background Commentary*, 593.

³³ Arnold, *Backgrounds Commentary* 3: 421.

³⁴ Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, “The Disclosure Formula in the Epistolary Papyri and in the New Testament: Development, Form, Function, and Syntax,” in *The Language of the New Testament: Context, History, and Development* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts; vol. 3 of *Early Christianity in its Hellenistic Context*; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 427, 434–436.

³⁵ This translation and any others throughout this section are my own.

³⁶ See Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek: A Coursebook On the Information Structure of New Testament Greek* (2nd ed.; Dallas: SIL International, 2000), for information on this kind of analysis.

topical marker (a point of departure) or for emphasis (a marked focal element). In the following citation of the verse, I will point out the points of departure (PoD) and the marked focal elements (MF): εἰ γὰρ πιστεύομεν ὅτι Ἰησοῦς (PoD) ἀπέθανεν καὶ ἀνέστη, οὕτως καὶ [πιστεύομεν ὅτι] ὁ θεὸς (PoD) τοὺς κοιμηθέντας (PoD) διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ (MF) ἄξει σὺν αὐτοῖς. First of all, I am assuming that πιστεύομεν ὅτι has elided from the second half of this verse and is signaled by the use of the additive καὶ. Thus, this is a statement about two beliefs in which the second belief depends upon the first one. The topic of the first belief, as signaled by the point of departure, is Jesus. The topic of the second belief is two-fold: God and “the sleeping ones.” The two beliefs are connected primarily through the marked focal element διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, which Paul has fronted for emphasis. Jesus died and rose, and *through him* God will bring the ones who sleep. This idea that Christ is the forerunner for our resurrection should sound familiar: Gregory of Nyssa and Rufinus of Aquileia suggest the same thing. With his word order, Paul emphasizes the agency of Jesus in our theology of resurrection.³⁷

Both Chrysostom and the background commentaries suggest that the “meeting” with the Lord (ἀπαντησις) is the greeting of a dignitary by a group of citizens, including the following procession into the city. I performed a brief word study in (Protestant) canonical Septuagint texts and the New Testament, and all three times the word is used in the New Testament (Matt 25:6; Acts 28:15; 1 Thess 4:17) it does indeed refer to an embassy coming out to greet a guest and escorting him or her. In the Septuagint (Protestant books only), the word occurs thirty-four times, of which twenty-three can be understood in the same way as the New Testament usages. Of the eleven other occurrences, five simply refer to meeting someone without the embassy overtones (Judges 14:5; 1 Sam 15:12; 1 Chron 19:5; Jer 27:3; 51:31), and six are used in warfare contexts

³⁷ This word order analysis and its conclusions are drawn from my undergraduate thesis.

to describe going out to battle (Judges 20:25, 31; 1 Sam 4:1; 13:5; 1 Chron 14:8; 19:5; 2 Chron 20:12). The warfare context does not work here, and while a simple meeting could fit the context, four out of these five uses include messenger overtones (the other occurrence describes a lion coming to meet Samson). The usage in the New and Old Testaments, then, confirms the arguments by Chrysostom and the background commentaries: “meeting” the Lord suggests an embassy that will return triumphantly to earth.

In this brief analysis, we have discovered nothing shocking or revolutionary, but by examining the text we have been able to support current theological concepts. However, one can also see how my theology has shaped how I interpret this passage in a discussion of timeline.

There are several temporal words in 4:15–17: φθάσωμεν, πρῶτον, and ἔπειτα. Before tackling this passage, I specifically stated that I am uncomfortable with timelines, and I did not address temporal issues at all above. In fact, based upon word order analysis, I argue that the temporal adverbs are not at the forefront of Paul’s mind, for he marks the συν prepositional phrases in these clauses as of primary importance. This indicates that Paul is more concerned with arguing that believers will be together with their dead brothers and with Christ than he is with temporal sequence. The sequence is added to assure living Christians in Thessalonica that their dead Christian brothers will not be disadvantaged when Christ comes but will partake in the embassy to greet Christ along with the living. In fact, says Paul, they get to go first. Thus, these temporal terms are not intended to give a timeline of end times events but to comfort a grieving and worried body of believers. Does my amillennial theology influence this reading? There is no doubt about it, and TIS takes theological presuppositions into account. One cannot simply believe anything one wants, however. TIS is not a free pass. One must rigorously defend one’s starting points, and I indeed believe that I can support my interpretation from the text.

Reading the Epic: Canonical Interpretation

In light of the fact that this little pericope is part of God's story, a canonical reading is essential. One obvious place to start is 2 Thess 2:1–12, in which Paul describes how Christ will not come unless certain figures are revealed and certain events occur first. These issues are not addressed at all in 1 Thessalonians, and thus they provide a supplement. Apparently, the “man of lawlessness” will be destroyed when Christ comes (παρουσία), which is the same word used in 1 Thess 4:15 for Christ's appearance. Thus, in addition to its positive effects upon Christians, the παρουσία will have negative results for the “lawless one” and those who are deceived by him. Readings in light of the book of Revelation are obviously essential as well. While this project is too large for this paper, I will simply point out one connection. In Rev 21:10, the New Jerusalem descends from heaven to the earth. What is this New Jerusalem? It is the people of God, and they do not go up to heaven but instead come down. The bride is walking down the stairs towards her husband. In combination with 1 Thessalonians, Christians are both the greeting party and the bride to be given away, but in both cases they process to the earth.

While more could be said about Revelation, I wish to address how 1 Thessalonians can and should be read in light of both the Old Testament and Jesus' ministry. First Samuel 28, in which Saul consults a medium, should not only be regarded as background material for Paul's teachings but also as authoritative parallel material. Leaving aside the whole matter of whether the medium normally brought people up from the grave, here Samuel actually appears and asks Saul why he has disturbed him (הִרְגִּזְתָּי). According to Brill's lexicon, this word means “to agitate, arouse.”³⁸ Samuel obviously had not perished, but he was in a state from which he could

³⁸ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (ed. and trans. M. E. J. Richardson; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 3:1183.

be “aroused.” If the medium could arouse Samuel, how much more will Christ’s coming with the sound of a trumpet and the voice of an archangel arouse those who sleep (the dead)?

John 14:1–6 bears some striking resemblances to 1 Thess 4:13–18. Here, Jesus uses the image of mansions to prove to his disciples that he is making a place for them and that he will come again so that they can always be where he is. This hope strikingly resembles 1 Thess 4:18: “and thus always with the Lord we will be.” Thus, both passages speak of the hope of being forever with Jesus after his return. Even more striking, however, is what Jesus goes on to say in the famous John 14:6: no one can come to the father except δι’ ἐμοῦ (through me). In 1 Thess 4:14, I already pointed out the prepositional phrase διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, which is a focal element. In both passages, only *through* Jesus can Christians be *with* Jesus.

Crossing the Ditch: Theological Conclusions

Since our theology and our biblical exegesis should inform each other, it is now time to reexamine our theology based upon our exegesis. Here pastors or teachers can rely upon their own knowledge or use systematic theologies, as I will here do. As a first example, “soul sleep” is often brought up in connection with this passage. According to Erickson, this is the idea that after death, the soul ceases to exist until the second coming, and many base this idea partially upon our passage. Erickson attacks this idea because of other biblical texts and because “sleep” appears to be used as an idiom.³⁹ Our background study, which suggests that sleep was indeed a common metaphor for death, supports Erickson against those who argue for soul sleep.

Another example appears in Rushdoony, who uses 1 Thess 4:14 in his explanation of the power of Jesus’s resurrection. For him, the pericope functions as assurance of believers’

³⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 1182–1183.

resurrection.⁴⁰ This theological point is strengthened by the word order analysis I presented above, which points to δια του Ἰησοῦ as an emphasized adverbial modifier of ἄξει (contrary to most commentaries). Paul makes it extremely explicit that Jesus’s resurrection is the basis for Christian resurrection, for the “bringing” of dead Christians happens *through Jesus*.

From these two examples, it is again clear that the historical, grammatical, and linguistic forays above do not make any great breakthroughs in theology. This is to be expected, for the faithful reader can understand Scripture, and the exegetical goal is to correct mistakes, not break through into new truth. In this case, however, an argument from our analysis of the text can be made against a certain use of this text in theology. In his work on progressive dispensational theology, Robert Saucy argues for two resurrections, one of Christians and one of unbelievers, and he uses 1 Thess 4:13–18 as an argument from silence, for it does not mention unbelievers.⁴¹ Considering our analysis of the text, especially the purpose laid out by the opening purpose clause (ἵνα μὴ λυπησθε καθὼς καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ οἱ μὴ ἔχοντες ἐλπίδα) and the letters of consolation that people would write to each other, this argument is very weak. Of course Paul does not mention the resurrection of unbelievers. His goal is to comfort Christians who have lost brothers and sisters in the faith. To use this passage to argue for two resurrections is thus irresponsible.

Sub-Creating Our Stories: Application

All of this theology is wonderful, but reading the passage must also change me and others so that our stories fit into God’s story. This is the final goal for most pastors and teachers. How then should we live? Our lives, but especially our deaths and the deaths of loved Christian

⁴⁰ Rousas John Rushdoony, *Systematic Theology: In Two Volumes* (Vallecito: Ross House Books, 1994), 2: 1144–1145.

⁴¹ Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 286.

brothers and sisters, should always be viewed in the context of Jesus' resurrection. Because Jesus died and rose, through him we also will rise. Christian funerals should be full of grief, but the light must shine through: we will see Christian loved ones again, for our stories do not end with death. We live in hope, and we should comfort those around us with that hope. This also suggests that we should not value this life too much. We must live as dead to this world and alive in the life and world to come. Christians must be otherworldly people.

CONCLUSION

With the case study behind us, it is my hope that the practical nature of TIS is now clear. For those who appreciate the hermeneutic, it is also my hope that this paper provides a manageable way to approach the Scriptures using TIS. In the end, TIS argues that all Scripture is an incarnation of the words of God in human form. In it, we encounter the Word made flesh, and thus our reading must conform to Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of all things. Our interpretations of Scripture must draw all things together and place them at his feet, viewing them all in his light. This task is much too great for the individual alone; it is the task of the church throughout time and space. The goal is for all of us to become humans who are truly changed by God's word, just as the world was formed by his word. Only as changed and sanctified people can we truly receive, and thus interpret, the words of God. The way to godly interpretation is through Jesus, and we come to him in the sacraments and in prayer but also in the text. To interpret rightly, we must be changed. To be changed, we must read.

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