Guidelines for Research Essays on Scriptural Interpretation

1. Choosing a Topic

Your paper may be may deal with any topic related to interpretations of the Scriptures in the three “Abrahamic” religious traditions; i.e., the Hebrew Bible (“Old Testament”), the Christian Bible including the New Testament, and the Qur’an. At various points in the class lectures, I have indicated subjects that I thought would lend themselves to interesting research essays; and of course these were intended to encompass other subjects of a similar kind. In choosing your topic, aim for one that is (1) interesting to you, (2) manageable (with readily available sources) (3) adaptable (so you can narrow in on an especially interesting or important aspect), and (4) arguable. Your research paper will essentially be an argument based in the available primary and secondary sources (see below).

The research articles that were assigned as readings should provide you with a good sampling of the kinds of approaches and methodologies that academic scholars have applied to the study of the scriptural interpretation. This course has been structured largely around variations on the “four senses” framework that was formulated and adapted by ancient and medieval religious traditions, distinguishing between literal, homiletical, allegorical, mystical and other ways of finding meaning in their sacred scriptures. Your essay need not deal with more than one scriptural text or religious tradition, though comparative studies are certainly encouraged.

Although finding a suitable topic can be a very individual process, there are two main strategies that are likely to lead to useful results:

1. Begin from a text in the Bible or Qur’an that you personally found puzzling or intriguing, and check what commentators (especially those who were studied in the assigned readings) had to say about it.

2. Read through relevant articles and books, and note some scriptural passages that have generated discussions in the scholarly literature.

Your Obedient Instructor will be happy to assist you in locating texts, etc. (but will not do your research for you). You are also encouraged to consult with Saundra Lipton <lipton@ucalgary.ca> at the U of C library. Ms. Lipton has prepared a Library Guide on Scriptural Interpretation that may be found at <http://libguides.ucalgary.ca/c.php?g=255149&p=4484388>.

I have tried to stress in the lectures that the interpretations composed by or for religious communities should not necessarily be assessed from the perspective of their “correctness”; i.e., how accurately they succeed in explaining the original meanings of the texts that they are citing. Although such literal exegesis is one type of interpretation that you could choose to examine, most of the “primary” authors [see
below] were approaching the scriptures with different objectives in mind, as well as different assumptions about the status of the text that they were interpreting (notably, that it was divinely revealed or inspired). Nevertheless, it is very useful to have an idea of the literal meaning of a scriptural text, which can help you recognize when the interpreters have departed from the obvious sense, and provoke you to start asking about why they have done so. Possible reasons might involve difficulties in the scriptural text, theological assumptions, social or historical factors and more.

As with many areas in Religious Studies, it is important to recall that a university course should deal with the material from a “scientific” and religiously neutral perspective. This is not the place to preach morality and spiritual virtues or to promote a specific religious (or, for that matter, anti-religious) perspective. Your argumentation must be based on evidence and rational demonstration. Thus, the essay that you produce will be very different from what you might have submitted for a Sunday school or seminary assignment. These considerations should be borne in mind when you are initially thinking about which topic to choose. It should also lead you to be extremely wary about using material from the Internet—where pages published under religious auspices greatly outnumber works of academic scholarship. The library search engines allow you to identify resources that are “peer-reviewed”; i.e., they have undergone a process of approval by competent academic readers before being accepted for publication. Although this is not a foolproof guarantee of their quality, it will help you filter out inappropriate material.

If you have any doubts about the appropriateness of your topic or scholarly resources, please discuss them with the instructor.

Note: If you find that your paper topic has become much narrower than what you originally expected, and that you are only dealing with only a portion of what you intended to when you began, do not worry. This is in fact a sign that you are on the right track, and that you are learning more about the subject (which is, after all, the main purpose of the assignment). Simply put, you are coming to realize that the topic is much more complex than it appeared initially from a distance. In general, you should prefer a detailed treatment of a narrowly defined question over a shallow survey of a very broad topic.

2. Researching Your Topic

Your research should begin with a library search on your chosen topic. As noted previously, aside from providing access to research databases, library catalogues and digital texts, the Internet is usually not a reliable source for scholarly material, especially in Religious Studies; and Wikipedia is particularly susceptible to the marginalization of scholarly content in favour of fundamentalist and doctrinal perspectives.

The U of C library provides its own curated Subject Guides which include resources in Biblical Studies, Judaism, Islam and other relevant topics. The most useful index of scholarly articles for your pur-
poses will likely be the ATLA Religion Database to which the U of C library subscribes. You could begin with a good published bibliography on your topic if such a bibliography is available, followed by a search on the U of C library’s on-line catalogue site to see if the library has the documents you want. On the basis of your searches you should develop a bibliography of your own.

Your should distinguish between primary and secondary sources. The former are the raw data of your research, actual texts and documents, etc. The main primary source you will be consulting will be the scripture itself. For purposes of this course, the commentaries are also to be treated as primary documents. “Secondary” works are studies by scholars who analyze, evaluate and interpret the primary sources in order to reach historical or other conclusions. (Thus, your own essay will be considered a secondary source).

The fact that a statement appears in a book or article does not make it a fact. The author must argue the case in light of the evidence, historical background and methodological principles. Different secondary works will often disagree in their assessments of the evidence, and it is up to you to decide which of them (if any) is more persuasive. Papers of this sort are often the most interesting and provide the best opportunities for you to demonstrate your scholarly acumen and judgment.

You are required to submit a “research proposal with preliminary bibliography” for this course. This short document should identify your topic, describe what you intend to do in your essay, and provide a basic bibliography of books and article to be consulted. It is recommended that you submit your proposal before the deadline in order to benefit from my feedback and prevent you from wasting time and effort on fruitless topics. The research proposal must define a specific question that you plan to explore and indicate that you have begun thinking and reading about it.

3. Writing the Paper

Your paper should normally have three components each of which has a particular purpose.

a) Introduction.

The purpose of the introduction is to explain in some detail what it is that you wish to do with your chosen topic. Aside from a general introduction to the topic you should state clearly what you wish to show, or prove, and how you wish to proceed.

b) Body.

In this section of the paper you provide the necessary historical and literary background for your chosen topic and develop the needed descriptive material and arguments in support of the task you have set for yourself in the introduction. In other words, there should be a clear connection between what you
have stated in the introduction as the purpose of the paper and what it is that you discuss in the text of the paper itself.

Most topics for this course will involve the examination of particular passages from a scripture as interpreted by one or more interpreters. The interpreters should be writing from within one of the Abrahamic religious traditions, possibly (but not necessarily) one of the authors whose works were studied in the classes and assigned readings. Any of the interpretative “senses” should serve as legitimate material for your research.

The most interesting and valuable research papers (for both the student and the professor) involve the testing of a thesis. This usually involves the posing of a question (e.g., “what did the author mean by this?” or “what impelled her to depart from the apparent plain meaning of the scriptural passage?”) to which there is more than one possible answer, and the proposing of your own solution to that question. As with any other scientific problem, you should collect the relevant data and establish criteria and methods by which you will evaluate the various possible theses. In many cases (though not all), this can be done by comparing the positions taken by previous secondary authors.

As an academic discipline, Religious Studies usually tries to maintain a scholarly “distance” from the material being studied. As noted above, this means that you should avoid taking personal moral or theological stands on the issues. At any rate, personal opinions of this sort will not be taken into account in the evaluation of the paper.

The paper should be properly documented; that is, it should have a proper bibliography and appropriate footnotes or endnotes. The Department of Classics and Religion prefers that you format your references according to the current edition of the Chicago Manual of Style. There are numerous computer applications that will organize and format your references for you; such as EndNote or Zotero (available for free).

c) Conclusions.

Use the Conclusions section to summarize the major findings of your research.

Some Useful Works

The following titles cover relatively broad areas of scriptural interpretation in the respective religions. They contain bibliographies and references that should lead you to additional resources:


