

BOOK REVIEW

Michael Kibbe. *From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016. 53 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-8308-5131-7. \$12.00.

Given the finite amount of time and energy that undergraduate and graduate students have to learn effective research and writing skills, alongside the limited amount of resources that faculty often have to cover these same fundamentals, many have undoubtedly desired a clear, succinct manual to accurately explain the mechanics of theological/biblical studies research. *From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research* is a user-friendly guide whose goal is to “take students directly from a research *assignment* to a research *argument*—in other words, from topic to thesis” (back cover, emphasis original).

In addition to a brief introduction, conclusion, subject index, and six helpful appendices, *From Topic to Thesis* is divided into five chapters, each of which cover one of the five steps involved in moving from topic (assignment) to thesis (argument), namely: (1) “Finding Direction,” (2) “Gathering Sources,” (3) “Understanding Issues,” (4) “Entering Discussion,” and (5) “Establishing Position.” The volume is intentionally designed to be read as a step-by-step hand-book for how to ‘assemble’ a quality research paper for students of religion, Bible, and theology. Kibbe states

Like an instruction manual, this book is designed to be as short as possible—complete step one, step two, etc., then stand back and admire your finished product. Theological research isn’t *quite* as simple as assembling a piece of furniture, but the basic idea is the same: take certain steps involving *these* pieces and not *those* pieces, in *this* order and not *that* order, and when you’re done you’ll have a product you can be proud of (13).

Each chapter provides insightful and helpful tips on how to practically complete each of the five main steps noted above. At the end of each chapter is a summary of the preceding material in specially framed and shaded boxes that draw attention to the main elements of that specific chapter. In order to help illustrate the “practical realities” of the step at hand, the author also provides short, personal descriptions of two research papers that he wrote as a student (50). Given that the volume’s target audience (Christian university/bible college/seminary students) usually take some combination of biblical and theological courses, the author has prudently chosen to offer one example from each one of these two disciplines.

The biblical studies example involves a seminary course on the Gospels in which the author was assigned an eight to ten page research paper on the Kingdom of God within the Gospel of Mark. Throughout the book, in a clear (but not overly simplistic) step by step manner, the author explains what he did in order to write the paper: what worked well for him, certain challenges that he faced, and a few specific mistakes/errors that he also made (so as to warn future researchers not to repeat any of his missteps). The theological studies example came from a graduate course on the doctrine of God in which the professor requested their students write a fifteen to twenty page paper that pertained to the course subject matter. The delineation of how the author approached these two (quite different) assignments will most assuredly be of service to the readers of this book.

Throughout the volume, the author makes clear the differences among and the inherent research value of primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. The author explicitly states: “Research is first and foremost about primary sources” (64, see too page 74). There are also numerous (but not overwhelmingly many) personal stories and shared experiences of the author’s own personal journeys (both for ill and for better) in these areas. One should also mention the two extremely useful excursus that the author provides, which are helpfully set-off from the rest of the text with special formatting and shading for ease of use.

These two short excursus (which, regrettably, are not clearly noted in the table of contents) are as follows: (1) “Common

Research Mistakes With Sources,” wherein the author highlights the dangers of using various internet and non-scholarly sources and discusses how to exercise a judicious use of sources, including the importance of noting using only one type of source (such as being overly reliant on commentaries) or focusing too narrowly on only one element of a (sub)discipline in one’s research (such as focusing on the historical elements of a particular topic to the neglect of its literary or theological aspects, etc.). Within this excursus the author also notes the necessity of engaging with sources that one does not necessarily agree with, stating, “presenting and interacting with the evidence *against* your thesis is a critical part of a research paper” (62–emphasis original). (2) “Common Research Mistakes in Interaction,” wherein the author notes the ineffectiveness of depending too much on tertiary and secondary sources (to the neglect of primary sources), as well as the need to curb the amount of direct quotations that one uses in their paper. The author maintains: “if you can say it in your own words, do so . . . if you can’t say it in your own words, study it until you can . . . You should only quote when you value *how* a scholar says something; if only the content itself is valuable, paraphrase” (74–emphasis original).

As noted above, the book also includes six appendices that cover a variety of topics. Appendix A delineates ten things that one should never do in a theological research paper, such as forgetting to identify your thesis or making personal attacks on scholars that one disagrees with. Appendix B is something of an annotated bibliography of five key books that one is encouraged to have on hand during the research and writing process, namely the *SBL Handbook of Style* 2nd ed. by Collins et al., eds. (SBL Press, 2014), *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* 8th ed. by Turabian (University of Chicago Press, 2013, 9th ed. 2018), *The Chicago Manual of Style* 16th ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2010, 17th ed. 2017), *The Craft of Research* 3rd ed. by Booth et al., (University of Chicago Press, 2008, 4th ed., 2016), and *Your Guide to Writing Quality Research Papers* by Vymeister 2nd ed. (Zondervan, 2008, 3rd ed. 2014). One notes, however, the conspicuous absence of Robert Hudson’s *The Christian Writer’s Manual of Style* 4th ed.

(Zondervan, 2016).

Appendix C is a partial list (briefly annotated) of some scholarly theological resources that one may find helpful in the research process. Appendix D delineates how to navigate the ATLA religion database and Appendix E highlights how to use the Zotero bibliography software. Lastly, Appendix F provides a suggested timeline for theological research papers—assuming a sixteen-week course.

By the way critique, I must be clear that I have very few quibbles with this handbook. Its clear and ‘to the point’ writing style, combined with the author’s highly engaging (even entertaining) prose, make it an easy and enjoyable read. The accurate and up to date recommendations with respect to source materials and other tools are also highly commendable. That being said, however, it would have, perhaps, behooved the author to have at least noted some of the annotated bibliography volumes that were available to him at the time of publication so as to help ease the burden of the fledgling student.

Also, as with many of these types of books, one can always note a few particular resources that perhaps should also have been included as well. Two volumes, in particular, should have been noted under the section of resources for “ancient Near Eastern texts,” namely (1) Kenton Sparks *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Baker, 2010) and (2) Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer’s *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (Baker, 2002).

Lastly, one may perhaps wonder if the author ‘sings the praises’ of Zotero too highly as compared to other bibliographic/reference-management devices (like Endnote, Bookends, Mendeley, Qiqqa, and Sente).

To conclude, the author states that “my hope is that this book not only enables you to do theological research but also to enjoy it” (90). With Kibbe’s *From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research* in hand, the process can indeed be made less painful. Its primary users will be theological/biblical studies students. For faculty who are looking for a good text that pertains specifically to the areas of research and writing (either for a

course that is specifically dedicated to those fields or perhaps to add as a supplement to another course) *From Topic to Thesis* is a solid choice.

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