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BOOK REVIEW

Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson. *Your Guide to Writing Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology*. 4th ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020. 342 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-310-106661-52699. \$22.60.

Books that give instructions for doing student research in biblical, theological, and/or pastoral areas tend to not readily offer as much assistance as they could with respect to how to do the main tasks of research writing well, i.e., bibliography, search techniques, organization, and form). Fortunately, authors Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson effectively remedy this problem with *Quality Research Papers*—now in its fourth edition.

The book has four explicit purposes (12):

1. To stimulate and develop students' capacity for doing careful and fruitful research;
2. To help students improve their ability to express clearly the results of their research;
3. To assist theology students in meeting the requirements of their educational program;
4. To allay students' fear of doing research by improving their skill and tools.

Aside from the preface, author's note, and five appendices ("Transliteration of Biblical Languages," "Abbreviations for Bible Books," "Websites for Abbreviations in the Area of Religion," "Tips on Format," and "Abbreviations for U.S. States," 325–40), *Quality Research Papers* is comprised of twenty-three chapters divided into four main parts: (i) "Kinds of Theological Research" (25–84), (ii) "Educational Settings for Theological Research" (85–124), (iii) "Carrying Out the Research" (125–244), and (iv) "Presenting the Research" (245–318). The introductory chapter, "Definition of Research," covers basic matters such as the research process, kinds of academic writing, the value of research, and what research is not. Chapters 2–5 (part

one), describe the types of research that is done by ministerial and seminary students: literary and historical; exegesis; description; program development; case studies; and action research. Chapters 6–9 (part two) cover academic writing, that is, class research papers, theses, dissertations, and writing for publication (book reviews and journal articles). Chapters 10–17 show students the process of writing the paper. Chapter 18 discusses notes and bibliographic entries, and chapter 19 presents statistics, graphs, and tables as used in research. Chapters 10 through 17 make up part three, while the last four chapters make up part four covering proper page format, writing Turabian notes and bibliographies, and models for APA in-text notes and references lists.

From its inception (and each subsequent revision), *Quality Research Papers* has stood out from its contemporaries due to its high standards of excellence and ease of use. The advice that the authors propose is both solid and well-crafted (often using pithy and poignant language). For example, Vyhmeister and Robertson state that there is “no space for saying the same thing twice. ‘Say it well, say it once’” (129). Elsewhere, they wisely emphasize that “using primary sources minimizes the danger of misinterpretation” (171) and “time spent learning how to write strong paragraphs is time well spent” (197). Alongside this, with respect to typography (spelling, punctuation details, etc.), the authors also judiciously assert: “Professors judge by what their eyes see. You, the student, are responsible for all the details” (252). Other tips include: “To work efficiently, keep your body in top-condition with proper rest, diet, and exercise” (180) and “back up your data . . . a computer crash could be disastrous. May I reiterate this last sentence?” (186).

The fourth edition of *Quality Research Papers* is updated to include the latest information for most major research formats, i.e., Chicago, Turabian, APA, SBL Handbook. There are also updated resource lists (more on this below) and additional support in different areas, predominantly with respect to style, format, and resource management—particularly those concerning library and internet research. Most importantly, however, this new (fourth) edition was intentionally revised from the perspective of

information abundance rather than *information scarcity*; that is to say, the contemporary research mindset has (rightly) shifted from *find and be satisfied with anything* to *intentionally choose the most reliable and credible sources*. Close readers will also spot numerous other editorial changes as well throughout the text.

As something of an aside, some mention should be made of the fact that the book itself is also quite pleasing to the eye. There are ample tables/graphs/charts, copious headings and sub-headings, and an effective use of bold-face type and shading (a particularly nice change). The length, too, is also a boon as no student would feel hopefully burdened even if multiple other texts were also assigned.

This does not mean, however, that the fourth edition of *Quality Research Papers* could not (somewhat) stand to be bolstered in certain areas. Minor quibbles, for instance, include the baffling editorial decision to only include a “select” bibliography, a problem that is particularly exacerbated by the fact that there is no accompanying author index. In a related way, one also notes that the subject index has been reduced from a robust (and most welcome!) eleven pages in the third edition to a meager single-total-page in the fourth edition. This is a particularly odd change in light of how the author’s explicitly note how effectively an index “facilitates research” (170). Other irritants include the (laughably) small font size that is used in appendix A “Transliteration of Biblical Languages” (325–26) as it is inordinately and unnecessarily difficult to discern between the many different Masoretic vowel pointing symbols. One may also, perhaps, have wished that the authors had pointed out more sources of bibliographic information, at large, such as, for instance, John F. Evan’s superb (and affordable!) volume *A Guide to Biblical Commentaries and Reference Works* (10th ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016). In a related way, though Vyhmeister and Robertson’s diverse listings of sundry recommended resources is usually fairly thorough, most specialists will note (among other works as well, perhaps) the inexplicable absence of Cline’s *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 1993–2016) and Louw and Nida’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the*

New Testament Based on Semantic Domains (2nd ed. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999). One should also note between the third and fourth edition of *Quality Research Papers* the strange disappearance in the “Help for the Novice Writer” section (205–6) of the fine volume by Joseph M. Williams and Joseph Bizup, *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (London: Pearson, 2016). It is also an unfortunate oversight that Unicode (the international standard for handling characters for *all* foreign languages, not just Greek and Hebrew), was not explicitly mentioned as being an option for all those individuals needing to engage with the original biblical languages.

For those students doing advanced research degrees (particularly a Ph.D.), further assistance in crafting a clear and effective thesis statement, developing an outstanding and rigorous methodology, and establishing a reputable and sustainable publishing lifestyle could have gone a long way. To that end, the neglect of *Quality Research Papers* to draw upon the insights found in Nijay K. Gupta’s *Prepare, Succeed, Advance: A Guidebook for Getting a PhD in Biblical Studies and Beyond* (2nd ed. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019) and Stanley E. Porter’s *Inking the Deal: A Guide for Successful Academic Publishing* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2010) is quite unfortunate as they would have served many readers quite well.

Setting such infelicities aside, however, given the dearth of such user-friendly and up-to-date ecumenical resources that are currently available, Vyhmeister and Roberston are to be highly commended for the service they have rendered to all students of the Bible (beginning, intermediate, and advanced) with the initial publication and successful revisions of *Your Guide to Writing Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology*. Through leveraging their work, one’s research may, indeed, more likely be “fruitful, stimulating, and even enjoyable!” (13).

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