

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 16

Heiser's Laws For Bible Study: Learning to Study the Bible, Part 1 Recorded in 2012

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This episode begins a series on learning how to engage the biblical text in ways that take you beyond merely reading the Bible. Dr. Heiser overviews a popular Naked Bible blog post (["Heiser's Laws for Bible Study"](#)) as an introduction. You don't have to be a scholar to learn to engage the biblical text and move beyond just reading the Bible in English. There are tools that will help you penetrate the text, and techniques for reading more carefully.

Transcript

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast. One of the hardest lessons I've had to learn as a professor and in my role at Logos Bible Software is that most Christians think Bible *reading* is Bible *study*. It isn't. That's followed by the corollary that what most people do beyond Bible reading isn't going to get them very far in the text, either. That is, what most people think of as Bible study isn't real biblical research. Poor sources and the axiomatic result of poor interaction with the biblical text is often at the heart of why pastors, seminary students, and laypeople I've encountered over the years get annoyed with me. I don't accept poor arguments and uninformed source material that produce positions and arguments that just aren't text-driven.

Most well-meaning believers unfortunately believe they're "digging into the Word" when they're reading writers like Chuck Swindoll or Greg Laurie or Max Lucado or... well... fill in the blank with any popular Christian Bible teacher. In fairness, though, I remember reading Swindoll's character study on Joshua when I was a teenager and really liking it, but after one or two of those things I realized I was just reading *about* the Bible. I wasn't really penetrating the text. In other words, I wasn't discovering anything that I couldn't learn through only a close reading of my English translation. Swindoll was a step in the right direction, but soon failed to satisfy. Other writers like Spurgeon or Andrew Murray or Lloyd Ogilvie were helpful to me, but I wanted to know the text, not just get some helpful insights for my spiritual life. For the record, I've come to realize that a close knowledge of the text and being moved to live right before God are not mutually exclusive.

My next step in high school was taking commentaries to study hall. That's something I recall telling my wife about only *after* we were married! Granted, I'm a text nerd, and I still think that there's something wrong with the Christian who doesn't want to know the text. I don't imagine I'll ever repent for that thought,

either. But I, of course, understand that every believer isn't going to learn Greek and Hebrew and all the other stuff that scholars study. That isn't God's calling for most people. However, every believer can always be doing something that encourages more attention to the text—that thing we say we believe is inspired. There are tools everyone can learn to use with competence so that they are less dependent on English translations and on the opinions of others. Dedication to the text (and only the text) won't answer every question we have. At times the text is ambiguous. But it will (if we allow it to) steer us to a more biblical theology. And then you can be in prayer about taking the lumps that come with that.

I've said all that to say this: This episode marks the beginning of a Naked Bible Podcast series focused on helping you discover tools to use for getting into the original biblical text, even if you can't read Greek and Hebrew. More importantly, we'll discuss why you would want to do that. Almost a year ago, I wrote a post on the Naked Bible entitled "Heiser's Laws for Bible Study." I'd like to go through that list in the time we have remaining, since I'll be unpacking these thoughts in episodes to come and adding to that list in an effort to help listeners become students of the Bible, not just readers.

So here are **Heiser's Laws for Bible Study**:

1. **There is no substitute for close attention to the biblical text.** After my intro, that sort of goes without saying. But think about it: How can you say you hold to a biblical theology without being able to root what you believe in the biblical text? Many Christians have a creedal theology or a "heard it from my parents" theology or a "my pastor says that" theology or even "that book in the Christian bookstore said it" theology. Those won't necessarily be deeply flawed (though they could be), but they are secondhand and based on someone paraphrasing what they read—in an English Bible, no less. Chances are, they're adequate for basic ideas, but they more often than not fall very short of being a carefully thought biblical theology that derives from the text.
2. **You should be observing the biblical text in the original languages.** If you can't do that, never trust one translation in a passage. Use several and then learn some skills for understanding why they disagree. That's the important thing. These skills would be things like learning grammatical terms and concepts so you can follow the discussion in a serious commentary (that is, a commentary that engages the original text). Other skills might include learning something about translation philosophy. You know every English Bible translation of recent origin has a rarely-read preface where the translation committee explains their philosophy. It also might include learning about "thinking fallacies" that can trip up interpreters, including scholars. Clear thinking often involves knowing what can be said and what can't be said about a given word or a passage. You can accumulate a lot of data, but if you don't think clearly about that data, they won't yield the results that they ought to.

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3. **Patterns in the text are more important than word studies.** Christians who want to go beyond Bible reading often graduate to word studies. Now, word studies are important, but they're a starting point, not an end-point for thinking about the text. If you take a look at word study resources that are perennial bestsellers, like Strong's Concordance and Strong's Dictionary, they are little more than grocery lists of alternative English word options for your English translation. Grocery lists lend themselves to a smorgasbord approach to Bible study. For instance, "I'll have that one and that one, but I think I'll pass on that meaning over there. It may give my beliefs indigestion if I use it." There's really more to word studies than picking from a list of English possibilities. And word studies, again, are not as important as patterns in the text—i.e., how terms keep popping up with close proximity to other terms and other phrases, perhaps in the same order or in juxtaposition with another cluster of items. Word study tools will not only *not* get you to that sort of observation, they won't even suggest it.
- 10:00 4. **The New Testament's use of the Old Testament is the key to understanding how prophecy works.** It's hard to overemphasize this one, since one inspired piece of literature ought to be our guide in regard to another. At least you'd think so. But if I had a dollar for every time I've had a conversation that included someone telling me how X, Y, Z Old Testament prophecy will be fulfilled (or was fulfilled) without the speaker knowing that the New Testament author clearly does not quote the Old Testament as it appears or that the New Testament author never said a particular Old Testament passage meant what this person says it means, I'd be driving a better car! Think of it this way: If you believe the New Testament writers were inspired when they quote the Old Testament (which was also inspired), might it not be a good idea to see how they quote it? Might it not also be a good idea to *not* say an Old Testament passage meant X, Y, Z or was a sign of some event in Jesus' day or a future time when a New Testament author never quoted it that way at all? My favorite example here is the Song of Solomon, which many Christians are taught has a meaning to symbolize the relationship of Christ and the Church. It's too bad that idea never occurred to Paul or any other New Testament writer. The Song of Solomon is never quoted and applied to Christ and the Church in that way in the New Testament. Even passages like Song of Solomon 2:1 (the passage that talks about the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valley) are not quoted about Jesus in the New Testament. In fact, there isn't a single clear citation of the Song of Solomon anywhere in the New Testament. Sure, you might find a cross-reference to it in your English Study Bible, but scholars who've actually looked at all the places in the New Testament where the writer cites the Old Testament will tell you just what I told you. So thinking the Song of Solomon is about Christ's love for the Church may give you a warm, fuzzy feeling, but it isn't biblical theology.
5. **The Bible must be interpreted in context, and that context isn't your own or that of your theological tradition; it is the context that produced it**

(ancient Near East/ancient Mediterranean). Put another way, if you're letting your theological tradition filter the Bible to you, you aren't doing Bible study. The Bible wasn't written during the period when Augustine or other Church Fathers lived, or the Middle Ages when Aquinas was writing, or the Reformation when Luther and Calvin were writing, or the fundamentalist era, or the era of modern evangelicalism. Those contexts are all foreign to the biblical context. Yet those contexts are constantly allowed to be the filter for the Bible to us. Again, you have a theology, if that's what you're doing—but you can't call it a *biblical* theology. It might be consistent at points with a biblical theology, but it may also be ignorant of or run counter to biblical theology.

6. **The Bible is a divine human book; treat it as such.** Notice what I *didn't* say. I didn't say the Bible is a divine book. I said it's a "divine human" book. Both parts of that equation are crucial and necessary. To be blunt, they were both chosen by God with respect to how this thing we call the Bible would be produced. Put another way, God chose *people* to write the biblical text, and people write using grammar, in styles understood by their peers, and with deliberate intent—and so the Bible did not just drop from heaven. Study it as though some person actually wrote it, not like the result of a paranormal event.
7. **If a passage is weird, it's important.** In other words, what we see in the text is there for a reason; it is not random and it must be treated in context—the context of where it's immediately found, the larger context of the book (think chapters and sections and then the whole book), and then the still larger context of the biblical worldview (which, as we just noted is not *your* worldview, nor was it any worldview after the first century A.D.). Just because a modern person finds a passage odd or offensive or downright bizarre doesn't mean it was just stuck in there to fill space or creep people out who live in a future time. It has a role to play in biblical theology.
8. **Don't hire someone to stock the grocery shelves who can't read the labels. Or: don't put your meds in the daily pill tray unless you can read the instructions.** What I mean by that is that putting Bible verses in categories of meaning (which is what Systematic Theology does) really isn't helpful and it can be misleading *if* what you think those verses mean doesn't derive from exegesis of the original text. You'd be rightly alarmed if you heard that the person working at the pharmacy who was putting the pills into bins and bottles and then on shelves couldn't read well or at all. The same applies to theology. Biblical theology should be done from the ground up, beginning with careful analysis of the biblical text—the grunt work of exegesis and original language study. *Then* you put those results of that work into some order. It shouldn't be done from the top down, starting with English translation and then making categories of things to believe. That's just proof-texting. But the dirty little secret in Christian education is that this is precisely what you're

getting with a lot of theology and Bible study books that are translation-based.

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9. **If, after you've done the grunt work of context-driven exegesis, what the biblical text says disturbs you, let it.** Put another way, if you aren't bothered by the Bible, you really can't be reading it closely. If your head isn't filled with questions about what you've read, about how the idea you just got from a passage needs to be balanced with some other passage, then you really haven't studied the Bible. You may have read it to get a spiritual buzz, but you're not thinking the thoughts of the text like you could. Trust me, the buzzes are better the deeper into the text you go.
 10. **Build a network of exegetical insights you can keep drawing upon; the connections are the result of a supernatural Mind guiding the human writers.** The only way to think God's thoughts are to follow the crumbs of the text where they lead, one at a time. This is one reason I encourage people to read the Bible like it's a fictional novel. You instinctively know when reading fiction that the writer is *doing* something to you—drawing your attention or deflecting it, leading you somewhere or misdirecting you for some clever reason. We read a novel and we just know we'll see that place again or hear that piece of dialogue again or we'll see that character again. We just *know* because our minds are wired in a certain way that's triggered when we go into our "I'm reading a novel" mode. We see the words differently when we're in that mode, as opposed to reading something like a textbook.

I hope these ten laws stimulate your thinking. In the episodes that follow, I'll branch off these ideas to help you progress in your own pursuit of the biblical text and what it reveals. Until next time...