Guidelines for Converting a Thesis or Dissertation into an Academic Book or Monograph

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1. Introduction

Biblical studies and theology students in masters and doctoral programmes often spend countless hours and several years toiling away in isolation to research and write acceptable theses or dissertations. (In this essay, the preceding two terms are used interchangeably.) It is only natural for them to consider how they might share the fruits of their labour to a wider academic readership. After all, the investigative undertaking is a social enterprise in which students become members of a scholarly community.

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Academic books and monographs are the established ways to disseminate the results of one’s research. This remains the case, even though other popular venues have arisen over the past two decades (e.g. e-journals, blogs, and so forth, made available over the Internet and accessed using a variety of mobile devices, including tablets and smartphones). Junior scholars need to recognise that the process of converting their graduate or postgraduate research into publishable form is neither easy nor straightforward. Expressed differently, it is not simply a matter of delivering the manuscript (perhaps completed a few years back) to a publisher, who then designs an appropriate cover before sending off the unaltered volume to the printers. Instead, the task is often labour-intensive, time consuming (on average, one to three years), mentally exhausting, and filled with uncertainty.

To set the stage for the guidelines appearing in the latter portion of this essay, the next section considers the distinctive nature of biblical and theological research. This is followed by a discussion of the complexities involved in revising one’s research findings. Then, the deliberation shifts to the benefits arising from the effort to rework one’s thesis or dissertation. Next, a comprehensive, though succinct, cluster of recommended steps is put forward for converting the capstone graduate or postgraduate project into an academic book or monograph. After that are observations about selecting a publisher and preparing the book proposal. The concluding section offers some final thoughts about the arduous process detailed in this essay. There is also a brief list of recommended resources for further reading on this subject.
2. The Distinctive Nature of Biblical and Theological Research

Biblical and theological research is the systematic process of gathering and analysing the information needed from scripture and secondary sources, in order to answer a question and thereby solve a problem. This definition implies that the rigorous study of God’s Word is not the mere gathering of information. Neither is it the rote transcription of facts. More importantly, the endeavour involves the interpretation of the pertinent biblical and extra-biblical data in order to increase one’s understanding of the issue being explored. The formal research report (e.g. a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation) is an established format to communicate one’s findings to interested readers.

Successful research does not just happen. It requires some sort of plan to guide the individual through the process. A good plan will include knowing the kinds of material one will need, how to find that material, and how to use that material. Once the materials are collected, the researcher makes use of them, not in a haphazard way, but rather, in a deliberate and intentional manner. The individual seeks to fashion a report using an approved scholarly apparatus that answers a particular question or set of questions, or resolves a particular issue or set of issues. All the materials gathered are used to fulfill this objective.

A research problem reflects incomplete knowledge or flawed understanding about a particular subject area (whether the latter is connected with academic reading or arises from a real-life

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2 Portions of what follows in this essay are a revision of material appearing in my online course titled, “Introduction to Integrated Research: MIT5301” (available on the SATS e-Campus website). Used by permission of SATS. All rights reserved.
circumstance). The origin of the problem can be either a practical shortcoming involving concrete situations or theoretical issues dealing with the realm of abstract concepts. A research problem, then, strives to gather enough information on a particular topic that has scriptural and doctrinal importance so that the issue under investigation can be clarified and better understood.

The assumption is that by doing the latter activity a greater good (namely, something more important) will be achieved. Expressed differently, by investigating topic ‘A’, a larger and more important matter will be clarified. In pure (or entirely academic) research, the consequences are conceptual, and the rationale defines what one wants to know. In applied (practical) research, the consequences are tangible (or concrete) and the rationale defines what one wants to do. The final, approved draft of the investigative endeavour is called a thesis or dissertation.

3. The Complexities of Revising One’s Research Findings

Successfully converting one’s thesis or dissertation into an academic book or monograph does not just happen. Making the necessary structural and stylistic modifications from one genre to another requires some sort of plan to guide the aspiring writer through the process. A good plan will include recognising the distinctive nature of one’s research findings, the target audience, and the intended publisher. It is within this specific context that graduates of masters and doctoral programmes rework their capstone project into a publishable form that others both within and outside the academy will want to read (as opposed to being required to read).
Having a plan is crucial, but so is being flexible. A plan is similar to a road map. It provides direction and guidance. Yet, it is not infallible. There are times when the would-be author must modify the plan and alter the original objective(s). This change might be due to an encounter with unanticipated difficulties or unexpected variables surfacing in the manuscript revision process. The main point to remember is that the task of altering the capstone project typically follows a crooked path, takes unexpected turns, and can even loop back on itself.

4. The Benefits of Revising One’s Research Findings

Given the complexities of revising one’s research findings, why would anyone bother to do so? On a personal level, the endeavour can prove to be fulfilling and challenging. For those who are intellectually curious, the tasks of gathering information from primary and secondary sources, organising it into a coherent form, and reporting/interpreting/analysing it reliably and persuasively brings immense satisfaction. On a community level, research can advance the field of scriptural and doctrinal knowledge in a particular area of interest. It can make a substantive contribution to the literature base of data, which, in turn, can prove useful to practitioners in that field of expertise.

The time-consuming task of converting one’s research findings to a publishable form (whether the changes are cosmetic or comprehensive) helps the aspiring writer better to understand what one has found and to clarify the relationships among one’s ideas. This is the natural result of arranging and rearranging the results of one’s research. In the process, one might notice new connections and contrasts, complications and implications that would otherwise be missed. The writing process helps the potential author to see larger patterns of meaning and significance,
and this, in turn, helps one to gain a more coherent perspective on just what is being thought and felt.

The basic task of revising one’s thesis or dissertation helps immensely to improve the quality of one’s prose. It enables the junior scholar to be more objective, rigorously logical, faithful to the evidence, and willing to question various findings from differing perspectives. Reworking one’s manuscript highlights one’s desire to enter into a thoughtful conversation with a broader group about what one has done. It says that the aspiring writer cares about what others think and how they respond to what has been discovered. This emphasises a fundamental but often overlooked aspect of scholastic undertakings in biblical and theological studies, namely, it is a social activity involving oneself and others. The academic book or monograph is written is such a way that even non-specialists will be able to follow it without confusion. Choosing to make the discourse as accessible and readable as possible to a wider audience says one strongly desires others to be a part of the work one has done in research.

Interested readers bring clear suppositions to their reading of an academic book or monograph. For instance, they expect the opening chapter to begin in a clear manner with a sense of where the material is going, and why the writer wants to take them there. Readers also require the opening chapter to explain what question the manuscript answers, what problem it deliberates (whether scholarly or practical), and how the treatise addresses the issue. Readers expect the remaining chapters of the publication to be developed in a coherent, sequential fashion. One chapter should build upon the previous ones, and all in turn should help address in a cogent way the primary concern raised in the opening chapter.
The goal, then, in revising one’s thesis or dissertation is not just to compile facts about a topic and offer a bland summary or drab report concerning them. It is to engage readers in a thoughtful conversation about a biblical or theological topic of mutual interest. As a result of having achieved this goal in the main body of the academic book or monograph, the final chapter should provide a satisfying and convincing ending to the discourse. This includes stating whether the hypotheses broached in the opening chapter have been supported and making recommendations for further study. Readers want to know how the findings and determinations detailed in the manuscript will change their thinking and beliefs. In short, they want to be told why the research is significant.

As aspiring writers draft their report, they endeavour to accomplish the following tangible goals: (1) to introduce new knowledge or a significantly altered or expanded view of already existing knowledge; (2) to challenge deeper beliefs being held by the readership; and (3) to clarify an enigma, solve a problem, or initiate an action. The greater the shift one wants to produce in the readers’ thinking, the harder junior scholars will have to work to be convincing.

5. The Recommended Steps for Converting the Thesis or Dissertation into an Academic Book or Monograph

It can be disheartening for graduates of masters and doctoral programmes in biblical studies and theology to submit their capstone project to various publishers, only to receive back one rejection letter after another. As was previously noted, if would-be authors want to see some aspect of their thesis or dissertation published, they need to invest the time and effort to revise it (in some cases resulting in an entirely new work). This entails converting the manuscript into a form that is
more accessible and inviting to a wider group of readers than just the two or three members of the examining committee who supervised their research. What follows are some recommended steps to accomplish this task.\\footnote{As a disclaimer, in light of the wide variety of academic presses in the publishing industry, it is difficult to make hard-and-fast generalisations here. Discerning readers should take the recommendations that follow with that caveat in mind.}

To begin, the opening chapter will almost always, without exception, need to be heavily reworked. For instance, longwinded explanations and circuitous rationale statements should be taken out. Also, language that is stiff, formal, and pedantic must be replaced by an engaging, cogent, and cohesive narrative voice. As a substitute, think about inserting more personalised opening remarks and stating why the topic is of interest to you. You might also consider recapping how your enthusiasm for the subject arose and what motivated you to undertake your research and writing endeavour. Be sure to explain why the treatise is important, not just to you, but also to the academic guild and the broader church community.

Many graduate and postgraduate reports have an entire chapter devoted to a rigorous assessment of the pertinent literature in their field of study. The intent is to demonstrate convincingly to one’s supervisors that one is familiar with the state of the scholarly debate connected with one’s chosen topic. Recognise that the situation is completely different for an academic book or monograph. Often, interested readers take for granted that the author is sufficiently qualified to write at length on the subject being exhaustively deliberated in the manuscript. In this case, a detailed, painstaking, and obtuse literature review is unnecessary. This material, then, should be either discarded or reduced to a few succinct
paragraphs. If the latter option is chosen, the material could be included in the first or the second chapter of the book or in an appendix.

Typical graduate and postgraduate capstone projects will contain chapters that are divided into main sections and various subjections. It is common for the latter to extend to two, three, or even four levels of demarcation. On the upside, this signals to one’s supervisors that one knows how to logically organise and sequence one’s material. On the downside, it results in a composition that is chopped up and disjointed. For this reason, the multiple layers of subsections should be removed and replaced by appropriate connecting statements and brief transitional phrases. The result is an academic book or monograph that readers find more fluid.

In many theses and dissertations, each chapter will contain one or more introductory paragraphs in which the junior scholar restates what was covered in preceding chapters, rehearses what will be covered in the present one, and conveys the rationale for doing so. Then, in the intervening sections and subsections, various aspects of the opening statements are reiterated in an increasingly complex manner. Finally, the closing section dutifully restates the same information. All this repetition, though, can seem unbearably pedantic to readers of an academic book or monograph. For that reason, the compulsion to endlessly backtrack material should be broken.

There are numerous occasions in which graduate and postgraduate students will feel obligated by the stringent demands of their supervisors to include formal citations for practically every statement made in their research project. These citations could number in the hundreds, if not thousands. While they might look impressive to a team of external examiners, all these citations end up being superfluous for an academic book or monograph. After all, the general readership will
assume that the author is a legitimate specialist in the field of study. In light of the latter, unnecessary and gratuitous citations should be removed. In turn, this will help to make the discourse more readable, since there will be far fewer distracting and interruptive references for non-specialists to trudge through.

Drastically reducing the number of formal citations also leads to paring back the bibliography (sometimes by as much as two-thirds). What is left is a leaner and more focused list of works actually referred to in the academic book or monograph. Often, the bibliography will be a straightforward alphabetical list. On other occasions, in order to make the bibliography of greater use to readers, the junior scholar might consider categorising the listings by subject, especially as it pertains to one’s research topic. A related option is to separate primary and secondary sources from one another. Also, print and Internet sources could be delineated. In any case, the main goal is to figure out the most suitable way to make the bibliography as architecturally coherent and user-friendly as possible to one’s target audience.

The manuscript should be read with a critical eye, and this includes recognising the benefit of thoroughly editing the document. Editing is sharpening a thought to a gemlike point and excising useless verbiage. Choosing one’s words precisely helps to clarify one’s writing. It eliminates foggy thought, jumbled statements, and lifeless phrasing. It is best to use simple words, concrete nouns, and active, expressive verbs. Shorter, more succinct sentences tend to work better than long, contorted ones. Aspiring writers should be alert to modification, as misplaced phrases and clauses can create havoc with the thoughts being conveyed.

As the thesis or dissertation is revised, excessive amounts of information should be spotted and drastically reduced. Other areas,
where an issue is insufficiently treated should be revisited and expanded accordingly. If there is newer information that is pertinent to the would-be author’s discourse, the findings of that research should be judiciously incorporated into the treatise, especially to add fresh insights to the study. Keep in mind that only material that advances the discussion or illustrates a point being made should be included.

Those who are novices at academic writing in the areas of biblical and theological studies are prone to face the following common shortcomings: spending too much time simply repeating what others have said; spending too little time analysing, synthesising, and evaluating the material of others and the data being collected; failing to organise the information gathered in research in a clear, coherent fashion; failing to correct a lack of flow in communication; failing to interact and document interaction with relevant, credible, and scholarly outside sources; excessively using quotes from outside resources (which come across as raw, undigested data); failing to understand that academic books and monographs are not a compilation of other people’s views, acting as ventriloquists for the writer; failing to comprehend that many and extensive quotations can detract from the professional quality of a manuscript, and can point to the author’s inability to render original work.

There are numerous ways to overcome the preceding pitfalls. At all times, it is important for junior scholars to stay in control of their argument and let their own authorial voice speak for them (e.g. in an unpretentious, engaging, and personal tone). They should include ideas from other sources only when those ideas add weight to their argument. They must also select quotes carefully. In general, they should not select quotations that only repeat points they have already made. Moreover, authors should ensure that the line of argument is theirs,
made up of their ideas and in their ‘voice’; yet these ideas must be informed by what other specialists have to say on the subject. In turn, this information should be presented objectively and scientifically, in the sense that writers are arguing from a broad knowledge of the subject, and can support what they say through the well-chosen references they make.

6. Selecting the Academic Publisher and Preparing the Book Proposal

Once the preliminary revisions have been made to the thesis or dissertation, time needs to be spent considering which academic publisher to choose. Guidance can be obtained from one’s supervisors, other respected specialists, and trusted professional peers. This advice should be augmented with information obtained from the publisher websites. The pertinent data includes recently released titles that are in one’s general and specific fields of study, along with the overall reputation of the publishers under consideration. If a particular publisher has a relevant series of interest, the series editor or acquisitions editor are likely individuals to contact.

Take into account whether a subvention (or subsidy) is charged to defray the production costs (including evaluating, editing, designing, printing, marketing, and distributing the completed work). In some cases, this can run into the thousands of dollars. Also, find out about the marketing and distribution services provided by respective academic publishers. This includes whether an effort is made to display new titles at applicable conferences and getting monographs reviewed in respected journals. Learn what the turnaround time is for the review and acceptance/rejection process of a manuscript proposal (or prospectus). The typical range is three to six months.
In preparing the proposal, make the prose as readable as possible. This includes describing the work in terms that are readily understandable to non-specialist marketing staff. For example, avoid using obscure, overly technical words, cumbersome phrases, and tortuous sentences. Put together a clear, discursive table of contents, a few representative sample chapters (rather than the entire manuscript; e.g. a strong introductory chapter and one or two substantive chapters from the main part of the book), and a series of well-crafted short summary statements of the manuscript’s contents. Be sure to communicate how much of the envisioned treatise is done and approximately how long it will take to finish the entire work.

Make the effort to tailor the proposal to the specific publisher to whom it will be sent. Academic presses post their author guidelines on their websites, so be sure to review and follow their instructions carefully. Often, acquisition editors want to know the title of the book, how it makes a significant contribution to the field of study, and in what way it reflects competent scholarship. They want to see whether the manuscript represents a unified whole, how it compares to other books currently published in the field that might offer competition to the work under consideration, and whether the latter could serve as a text or assigned reading in a college or university course. Each of these factors helps to determine whether the project has sufficient academic merit and is economically viable.

Remember that the proposal is a formal way of signalling to a prospective publisher that one’s academic book or monograph is intellectually valuable and worthy of being made available to a wider readership (including both scholars and non-specialists). An acquisition editor and the editorial board of the press will want to know why they should publish this manuscript (typically resulting in a print run of only
a few hundred books). For instance, what new discoveries does it present and/or what new information does it put forward? In what specific ways does this proposed publication add to or expand the existing field of knowledge? It is best to remain as objective and truthful as possible. Discerning editors and reviewers can spot when an aspiring writer is overstating the prospects for the work under consideration.

7. Conclusion

Here are some final thoughts about the arduous and time-consuming process of converting one’s thesis or dissertation into an academic book or monograph. Begin with prayer, especially for oneself, one’s motivation, and God’s glory. Also, try to stay enthusiastic and persistent. This includes planning carefully and being resourceful when things go wrong.

Furthermore, allow plenty of time to revise the manuscript for publication. For instance, if it is has been several years since the completion of the capstone project, the junior scholar might have to make several additional visits to the library to update the research. This includes taking one’s time while at the library to thoughtfully and carefully access the pertinent up-to-date sources of information. Moreover, aspiring writers should be prepared for obstacles—books that are checked out, online searches that do not seem to work, and sources that are not what one thought they would be. Keep in mind that these sorts of issues are all part of the revision process.