


Biblical Languages: Challenges for postgraduate supervision in Old and New Testament Studies

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In South Africa and in many other countries in Africa and around the globe, the demand for more Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) candidates has increased. With such a demand, a number of challenges also arise. In the discipline of Theology, these challenges are becoming apparent in Old and New Testament Studies, where these fields are experiencing a declining number of students enrolling for biblical languages. This problem is enhanced as the current inherent requirement to study for a PhD in Old Testament is that one must have a knowledge of Biblical Hebrew (and Aramaic), and for New Testament, one needs Greek at an advanced level. Supervisors are challenged more and more to defend these requirements that are complicated by the developmental goals of institutions that require that the number of PhD candidates be increased. In this article, the challenges faced by PhD supervisors (and candidates) in respect of students wanting to enrol for PhDs in Old and New Testament without the necessary requirements are considered, and a case is made as to why it is essential that these students have a background in biblical languages. If students do not take the biblical languages as part of their (undergraduate) studies, immediate concerns for the future of Old and New Testament research and biblical translations (and ministry) are raised. The article concludes with possible suggestions for addressing some of these concerns.

Contribution: This article makes an interdisciplinary contribution based on current challenges experienced in the education and supervision of postgraduate studies in the fields of Old Testament and New Testament and on the development and training of postgraduate supervisors in practical education as to contribute to the relevance and practice of theological education today and the future.

Keywords: Old and New Testament Supervision; doctoral supervision; Biblical Hebrew and Greek; teaching and learning; postgraduate studies.

Introduction

A hermeneutical maxim: It makes little to no difference at all whether you master the text. In fact, you cannot master the text. It is impossible. So never let that be your goal in Biblical interpretation. On the other hand, it makes all the difference in the world whether the text masters you. So strive with all your might to be a slave to the text.

Jerry Shepherd¹

Education in the higher education sector is seen as one of the solutions for the various political and social challenges the African continent is facing. In South Africa, as in many African countries, the demand for more Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) candidates has increased, together with a number of associated challenges. An increased number of PhD graduates is seen as one of the means for achieving the Africa developmental agenda goals (Okeke-Uzodike 2021:1175–1177). Okeke-Uzodike (2021:1175) refers to the remarks by Okeke at the 2015 *African Higher education summit* when she notes that:

[T]hough higher education in Africa offers scope for cultural and community development, it plays a critical role within the global context in which knowledge-based innovations and products fetch high value on the market. (p. 1175)²

This poses an enormous challenge to supervisors to produce PhD candidates and outputs.³

1. Posted on the Facebook page of Firth (2002) on 07 November 2022.

2. See also in this regard the important contribution of Mouton, Boshoff and James (2015:1–22) on doctoral supervision in South Africa.

3. See Ungadi (2021:1–24) for a further discussion on some of the challenges doctoral supervisors are experiencing in South African institutions of higher education.

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The same holds true for the fields of Old and New Testament Studies in Theology. The greatest problem faced in these fields is the declining number of students enrolling for biblical languages in undergraduate studies, with their inherent requirement of Biblical Hebrew (and Aramaic) for a PhD in Old Testament and Greek at an advanced level for New Testament Studies.⁴ Supervisors are challenged more and more to defend these requirements, which are complicated by the developmental goals of institutions that require increases in the number of PhD candidates.

In this article, the challenges faced by both PhD supervisors and candidates in respect of students wanting to enrol for PhDs in Old and New Testament without the necessary language requirements are considered, and a case is made as to why it is essential that these students take biblical languages as part of their studies. If students do not take the biblical languages, immediate concerns for the future of Old and New Testament research and biblical translations are noticed. The article concludes with possible suggestions for addressing some of these concerns.

Current state and challenges

It seems that the two biggest challenges for biblical languages are the number of students enrolling for Biblical Hebrew (including Aramaic) and Greek and meeting the inherent requirements for further studies. The challenges associated with each of these are discussed in the next section.

The number of students

In a recent meeting (on 26 October 2022) between several South African tertiary institutions, an online *Indaba on biblical languages* was hosted by the University of Stellenbosch, during which the question was posed regarding the current state of biblical languages students and research in South African institutions. In this meeting, it became clear that the declining number of students enrolling for biblical languages is becoming a serious problem. According to Okode (2010: 93–94), students do not learn the languages sufficiently well to be able to use them later in ministry. For him, the problem is situated within the curricula of institutions, where the necessity of studying biblical languages is not explicitly and

4. Although this is a global phenomenon and problem, this article focuses mainly on a Southern African context with a specific focus on examples from South African universities. Saying this immediately focuses on the following aspects that should be noticed. For many years, the Theological Faculties of the University of the Free State, North West University, University of Pretoria and Stellenbosch University trained mainly students in the reformed traditions (Reformed Churches in South Africa [RCSA], Dutch Reformed Church [DRC], Dutch Reformed Church [Nederduits Hervormde Kerk; NHK], Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa [URCSA] and others) for ministry. The faculties and these churches depended on each other, and these churches impacted the curriculum. Over the last two decades, this has changed dramatically as the relationship between the faculties and the churches has changed, and most of these faculties are now ecumenical and train students from multiple denominations; for many of the reformed traditional churches, studying the ancient biblical languages was a requirement (for many up to the second-year level). For many current students, the languages are no longer required by their denominations. This leaves the question of why ancient languages should still be included in the degree programmes. Is it still essential for research and ministry? If no, the programmes must change; if yes, the current problem should be addressed (for that purpose, the ministry context is included in this article).

sufficiently underscored. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that many church denominations, colleges and seminaries do not require biblical languages for graduation. For many students, these languages are elective modules or optional (they see them only as optional), if the institutions have them at all. In some situations, ‘students are required to take only a single course in one or both languages’ (Okode 2010:93–94). Unfortunately, this is not enough for further postgraduate studies or sufficient for the practical use of biblical languages after graduation. This also downplays the value of languages and makes students think they are not essential. Richardson (1909:73) is right to conclude that ‘Hebrew [and Greek] should, therefore, not only be a part of every seminary curriculum, but should be required for graduation’.

According to Van der Merwe (2022:online), the challenges of studying ancient languages (languages that are no longer spoken today) start as a pedagogical challenge.⁵ When it comes to students that still need to complete Hebrew and Greek, lecturers and for that matter, also supervisors, have to take into account (Van der Merwe 2022:Online):

[T]hat students may lack the very basis for learning a complex new language, such as a basic understanding (even in their mother tongue) of how language and vocabulary are constructed. Furthermore, the historical context of these languages is critical for constructing meaning with regard to understanding languages such as Biblical Hebrew. In the lecturer’s experience (and based on the literature on language acquisition teaching), learning a new language is highly dependent on student motivation.⁶

Therefore, a more pragmatic approach on the part of the lecturer or supervisor is advisable when supporting a student. In this regard, when speaking of different supervisor models, one has to consider the apprentice model, as this is an ideal model for supporting a student needing individual attention. Although this may be regarded as a default model when it comes to doctoral supervision, it can help motivate the student if he or she feels that there is strong support. That said, more flexible and creative co-supervision models will also help the student, as shared expertise through supervisors will be to his or her benefit (Frick 2022).⁷

One of the main reasons why students in Africa do not enrol in the ancient languages is that many students depend on biblical translations and therefore do not see the need for learning the original language. Knowledge of the Bible is facilitated through the use of translations and interpretations and by using secondary and popular writings on the Bible (Mojola 2014:1–2). Translations are available in both local and non-local languages, and

5. See also the work of Callahan (2018:235–258) in this regard.

6. It seems this matter is even further complicated if it is a small department or institution and students only take Hebrew on an introductory level; see the argument by Mandell (2003:79–84).

7. In this regard, the development of the student–supervisor relationship can help motivate the student to achieve those objectives. The purpose should be to develop the student (Lee 2018:884).

although these translations empower students to read and interpret the Bible in their own language, the skill to read the Bible in its primary source is not acquired and is desperately needed. One might nevertheless expect that from the profession these students are in, they would have encountered or chosen to study the biblical languages. Students skilled in ancient languages will be able to produce research that can be appropriated in a contextual and cultural manner.⁸ The task of the supervisor would be to guide the student in this process, thus shaping the fields of the Old and New Testament in Africa. If these skills are not developed, students will always be reliant on translations and secondary works. Another challenge is that the translations used by African students were performed by people (missionaries who were non-mother tongue speakers) who learned the language over time and then translated the Bible (Mojola 2014:4–7).⁹ If African students are guided to learn the primary source of the Bible, they will be able to produce translations in their mother tongue that should be of a much better quality. Critical commentaries on the Bible will be able to be written by Africans for Africans.¹⁰ If the number of students enrolling for biblical languages does not grow, therefore, this will become an even more serious problem in the future.

Students meeting the requirements level

What are the current requirements for Old and New Testament PhD Studies at local South African institutions?¹¹ The four state institutions in South Africa with faculties in Theology are the North-West University (NWU), Stellenbosch University (SU), the University of the Free State (UFS) and the University of Pretoria (UP). According to *NWU's Faculty of Theology Undergraduate and Postgraduate 2022 Yearbook* (2022:129–130), the requirements for a PhD in Old Testament or New Testament on an NQF level 10 are a minimum of 65% for the preceding qualification, a satisfactory knowledge of Biblical Hebrew (as well as of Aramaic if Aramaic texts are read) for Old Testament and a satisfactory knowledge of Biblical Greek for New Testament. It is not stated on which level the Hebrew or Greek must be.

At SU, the *Theology Academic Programmes and Faculty Information Calendar, Part 9* (Stellenbosch University 2022) states that the requirements for a PhD in Old or New Testament Studies are that one must be:

[I]n possession of the MTh degree (thesis option) of this University with a minimum final mark of 60% or a MPhil (Religion and Culture) degree of this university with a minimum final mark of 60%, or a MDiv degree of this university with a

8. See in this regard the article by Wendland (2004:81–96).

9. See also the important contribution of Walls (2002:217–228) on this topic.

10. See also on this topic Mojola (2002:202–213).

11. There are multiple private theological seminaries and institutions in South Africa and institutions with biblical studies departments. For the purpose of this article, only the four state institutions with known theological faculties will be compared.

minimum final mark of 70% and have obtained a minimum final mark of 70% in the research assignment. (p. 49)

A further requirement is that for:

Old Testament, Biblical Hebrew III, or an equivalent qualification and for New Testament, Greek III or an equivalent qualification is needed. Exceptions may be made with regard to the Biblical Hebrew III or Greek III requirements in cases where the Ancient Languages are not important to the theme of the dissertation. University of Pretoria Yearbook 2022 (2002:1)

It is not stated how these exceptions will be determined and evaluated.

According to the *Rule Book 2002* (University of the Free State 2002) of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the UFS, the requirements for a PhD in Old and New Testament Studies are:

[A]n appropriate Master's Degree or equivalent qualification (NQF Exit Level 9), and [one must] have obtained a weighted average of at least 65% or obtained a mark of at least 65% in the modules (at the highest NQF level) presented in the discipline in which he or she is to proceed; or a Master of Divinity qualification with a weighted average of at least 70% as well as a minimum mark of 70% in the mini-dissertation. (pp. 74, 76)

A further requirement is that for the Old Testament, 32 credits of Hebrew at NQF Level 5 or higher are required, and for New Testament, 32 credits of New Testament Greek at NQF Level 5 or higher are required.

The *University of Pretoria Yearbook 2022* (2002:1) for the Faculty of Theology and Religion states that the requirements for a PhD in Old and New Testament Studies, a relevant master's degree with at least 65% for the research component at master's level should have been completed. For Old Testament, Hebrew passed at the second-year level of the bachelor's degree or an admissions examination may be required. For New Testament, Greek passed at the second-year level of the bachelor's degree or an admissions examination may be required.

From the given rulebooks of the faculties, it is still clear that to complete a PhD in Old or New Testament Studies, either Biblical Hebrew or Greek is still an inherent requirement. Therefore, students must be motivated to take and continue with biblical language studies.

A case for studying the ancient biblical languages

Okode (2010:91–92) asks the question of whether Biblical Hebrew and Greek are optional or indispensable. The reason for this question is the fact that many students give up on studying these languages even before they have tried. The objections by students to studying the languages are that they are difficult and take too long to learn. There are also multiple good translations available, and furthermore, they are even available in mother tongue translations (as indicated

by Mojola 2014:4–7). A further objection is that only potential lecturers in Bible colleges or universities need to study biblical languages and not those going into ministry.¹² Another objection is that those who did study ancient languages do not use their skills after graduation. This raises the question of why one should teach ministers biblical languages if they do not use the skill to prepare for sermons in their congregations. It seems that in a culture where immediate gratification is the norm, the practical needs of the congregation take the lead over well-informative expositions of the biblical text (Okode 2010:92).¹³ It would seem that this last objection has more to do with the preacher and how he or she addresses the demands of the congregation, than being a valuable objection for not doing proper exegesis.¹⁴ Studying the languages must be important not only to the academic researcher (or postgraduate student) but also to those who pursue ministry as both are dependent on their exegetical skills.

How then should a promotor (or supervisor) advance or rather explain the value of studying the languages to enable a student to complete a doctorate in Old or New Testament Studies? A debatable point is whether it is part of the promotor's (or supervisor's) role to recruit doctoral students.¹⁵ If the pressure to recruit students in order to reach required university targets can cause one to be in the position of having to ask whether the inherent requirements of languages are still necessary, this creates a problem. At the same time, if one comes to the conclusion that this should remain an inherent requirement, additional challenges are faced by the supervisor. This is even more the case when one has students who have been inherited from other supervisors. It is, therefore, an essential role of the supervisor to develop the candidate's skills to ensure that part of the development is also acquiring the necessary language skill to complete an internationally recognised doctoral.¹⁶ Skill development by the supervisor is essential

12. According to Okode (2010:91–92), firstly, the argument is at best self-defeating as it implies that the academicians are detached from the day-to-day happenings of the preacher, 'they inhabit the abstract world of the intricacies of the otherwise dead'. Then why allow such a teacher to train ministers and, for that matter, study biblical languages? Secondly, it must be understood that the exegesis of the texts should also be applied contextually and, therefore, cannot be separated. One should be competent in biblical languages to be able to do exegesis that can be appropriated in daily cultural contexts. This also applies not only to the full-time academic but also to the minister (or preacher) in a congregation.

13. A further problem that arises from this one is that many scholars of ancient languages never acquired or developed the skill to take their knowledge of Biblical Hebrew and Greek vocabulary, paradigms, morphology and syntax and make it contextually relevant in order to do an appropriation of the text. This contributes to the problem of students or graduates saying that they will never use the languages again (Chisholm 1998:9).

14. For Okode (2010:92–94), the last objection should rather be understood in terms of graduates who lack the discipline to use the biblical languages, that they never developed their skill (learned) enough to know the languages, that they do not 'see biblical languages as worth the work' and that they 'think biblical languages are for exceptionally gifted people'.

15. For a further discussion on this topic, see the work of Larsson (2021).

16. In this regard, the choice of the supervisor is also very important for the student. The student needs a supervisor who can advise and develop the skills of the candidate. If the supervisor takes on a negative role by becoming abusive, controlling or a ghost supervisor (invisible supervisor), for example, this can be devastating not only for the candidate but also for the positive development of the PhD programme and its aims (Almusaed & Almssad 2020:29–30). Bégin and Gérard (2013:267–276) approach the supervisor role by evaluating the experience of 533 doctoral students, indicating the important role the supervisor performs in the positive outcome of a PhD thesis.

for any candidate in order to promote development and growth (Almusaed & Almssad 2020:25–28).¹⁷ According to Almusaed and Almssad (2020:25), 'Respectable supervisory aid students to achieve their potential and add to the University's research outline'. It seems, therefore, that a supervisor must be able to make a case for the ancient languages to ensure that students continue to complete internationally relevant Old and New Testament PhDs – not only for the recruitment role but also to retain quality control.

In his grammar for Biblical Hebrew, Jacques Doukhan (1993:ix) makes an essential contribution to the question of the value of studying ancient biblical languages. Even though in many instances, it is considered by students as a complicated, sometimes tedious and for many, irrelevant requirement, Doukhan (1993:ix–xxi) believes that it is indispensable to do proper exegesis.¹⁸ He starts his argument for the study of these languages on a positive note by explaining firstly that historically, these were the languages that the ancient Israelites used, and that therefore, to understand the culture and context properly, they should be studied.¹⁹ The languages are a witness to an ancient civilisation.²⁰ According to Doukhan (1993:x), firstly, the reason for studying ancient languages 'is then historical in nature'. Secondly, Doukhan (1993:xii) argues that these languages are the languages of theology. In Israel, Hebrew (and later Greek) became the language in which they expressed their theology and thought (philosophies). It became the 'mirror of the mind'. The second reason for studying ancient languages is therefore 'theological in nature'. Thirdly, Doukhan (1993:xv) argues that over time, these languages became part of what is understood today by many religious people as the 'Holy Scriptures'. This is the development of the last 2000 years within the Jewish and Christian traditions. Doukhan (1993:xxiv–xxv) suggests that studying ancient languages both deductively and inductively ensures that the value is understood and that interpretations and applications can happen.

For Okode (2010:95), a case for the biblical languages can be made using the following arguments: Firstly, 'meaning'.²¹ To be able to understand the possible original meaning or intended message of the text that was conveyed to the

17. The New Testament scholar Domeris (2020:102–109) wrote an interesting article explaining also the challenges to the supervisor of developing the skills of an online student. The online environment intensifies the challenges that supervisors and candidates alike can face regarding postgraduate studies.

18. Typical arguments for saying that it is not necessary to study the ancient languages are (Doukhan 1993:xxii–xxiv): It is too difficult; Hebrew is not a Christian language (the fact is, although, it was one of the first languages of Christians); Hebrew is not useful (it is essential however for the hermeneutical study of the text); there are other priorities in ministry; we can rely on good translations and scholarly studies (the fact is that those translations still have to be made and studies need to be done. A translation is always subjective and therefore "Traduttore traditore," translations are treacherous); my knowledge of Hebrew will never be sufficient anyway (a perfect knowledge of a second or third language is always tricky but it remains a continuous study).

19. See also for a further discussion on this topic, the work of Moloney (2016:1–7).

20. For example, who would question the need for studying English to understand the works of the writer Shakespeare? It is essential to the study (Doukhan 1993:ix).

21. See also Deist (1992:91–110) on the importance of meaning when it relates to biblical translations and relevance theory.

original readers of the text, one needs to be able to understand Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek.²² These languages have different idioms and structures from our own modern languages. Therefore, one needs to understand that these words are 'contextual, conventional and historically particular'. We need the ancient languages to convey the meaning of the text to our modern readers (Okode 2010:95–96). Secondly, translations will always be interpretive in nature, even if it is a translation in a mother tongue. An understanding of ancient languages is needed to ensure the further development of translations and the knowledge of translator skills (Okode 2010:96–98). Thirdly, the 'task of doing theology requires competence in biblical languages' (Okode 2010:98). To be able to take a foundational stance in biblical theology, one would need thorough exegesis. This is only possible if one is skilled in biblical languages. Fourthly, 'how language and culture operate tells us how the original languages contribute to our interpretation of the Bible' (Okode 2010:100). One cannot be without the other. Lastly, the rhetorical features should also be considered as writers, in many instances, use rhetorical features in the process of communication, using different poetical and language techniques (Okode 2010:101).

If one then comes to the conclusion that the ancient biblical languages are, as Okode (2010:91) puts it, not optional but indispensable,²³ one should ask what some of the major concerns for the future of Old and New Testament PhD studies are – and not only what the concerns are, but also what their possible solutions are, as these directly influence the students and their supervisors.

Immediate concerns

Taking the aforementioned into account, immediate concerns arise for the future because of the lack of students and PhD candidates in Old and New Testament Studies. Many of these concerns have already been voiced in the given points, but for clarity, they will be listed here again. Without biblical languages as a requirement for postgraduate studies (and, for that matter, even for undergraduate studies), a decision will have to be made on the future of PhD qualification requirements for Old and New Testament Studies. The case will be that more and more students will not qualify for postgraduate studies in the Old and New Testament. This concern escalates as the implication is that Old and New Testament qualifications produced in Southern Africa without the languages as a requirement will not meet international expectations or standards. There will be no academicians who are able to lecture, teach and do research on these languages. If research does not meet global standards, local institutions will become more and more dependent on international rather than local scholars for training and supervision for these fields to remain relevant.

22.Schoeman (1997:407–427) suggests looking at how early Hebrew education took place and its significance for present-day educational theory and practice. It may not be a solution to the problem of teaching Hebrew, but it may indeed provide new perspectives on the topic.

23. See also the following works for further arguments on why it is important to study biblical languages: Noll (2019:39–44), Villeneuve (2017:1–31).

On the community level, the impact will be that more and more ministers will not be competent to do textual exegesis from the Hebrew and Greek texts. Without these researchers and training, the future of local Bible translations will surely be at risk.

Possible solutions

In many instances, the problems related to postgraduate studies in Africa can be linked to material problems. The lack of resources or the dependence on other countries' resources causes a lack of motivation for students to pursue further studies and to take on the challenges of postgraduate studies. It would, therefore, seem that one of the first issues to be addressed is overcoming dependency (Walls 2002:227–228). Scholarship in Africa must, at some point, develop to the point of becoming self-sustaining. African students and academics will have to become independent in order to create a new alternative hermeneutic, where scholarship can develop and new biblical research, translations and commentaries are written, based on the ancient languages, by students and academics from Africa for Africa.²⁴ Supervisors can play an important role in motivating the need for these languages to help achieve this outcome.

This relates to the second possible solution, which is that academic institutions (universities) will have to intentionally develop and train lecturers in the fields of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, to ensure that the knowledge and skill to educate students in these languages and also for further supervision in postgraduate studies, is available. If this is not rectified in the near future, African institutions will become dependent on international institutions to educate students and to supervise possible PhD candidates, as the skills will not be available locally. This again has the effect that research will not be developed contextually to be relevant for African communities. Developing these skills will ensure that future Bible translations are made from sources in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek by mother tongue scholars. This will have to happen in an intentional manner to be successful.

Taking the current situation into account, that many students do not yet have the inherent requirement of Biblical Hebrew (and Aramaic) and Biblical Greek to do a PhD in Old or New Testament Studies, supervisors and their institutions will have to consider adopting an initial flexible period where students are given the opportunity to complete their language studies, while they are busy with their PhD studies. This will place an enormous additional burden on the supervisor but will ensure that the skills, knowledge and research in Africa for biblical studies will develop and become internationally recognised and independent.

A further consideration may be to look at different doctoral types for the PhD programmes in the Old and New Testament. It has been seen here that Stellenbosch University has already changed the requirements by providing an

24. See in this regard also the important contribution of Masenya (2013:455–464).

exception to the typical rule in cases where the ancient languages are not directly required for the theme of the dissertation or thesis. Perhaps what should be considered is the promotion of two lines of doctorates in Old and New Testament Studies: one that follows the more traditional format of a monograph or a publication-based thesis and one that follows the professional doctorate route (for a New Generation PhD). The latter refers to doctorates who are seeking:

... [A] programme of research, scholarship and advanced study which enables candidates to make a significant contribution to knowledge and practice in their professional context. In doing so, a candidate may also contribute more generally to scholarship within the discipline or field of study. Professional doctorate students should be required to apply their research and study to problems, issues or other matters of substance which produce significant benefits in professional practice. (Quoted by Botha, [2022] from the Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies [1998:1].)

Such professional doctorates are aimed more at candidates who are already engaged in a career and want to contribute to the 'community of the practice as opposed to the community of academics' (Botha 2022; see also Maxwell & Kupczyk-Romanczuk 2009:135–145). These studies tend to be more transdisciplinary. In the cases of both kinds of doctorates, the languages can then be a requirement or not. That said, the immediate danger of this proposal is that the ancient languages are once again undermined, and this option should be considered very carefully.

Conclusions

This article has indicated the immense challenges that supervisors in the fields of Old and New Testament Studies are facing regarding the pressure to produce doctoral candidates, where many of the students do not meet the inherent requirements to continue with such studies. The challenges can be overcome if supervisors and lecturers in these fields motivate why it is necessary for students to study these languages and to have them for their postgraduate studies. If this is not done, several immediate problems for the future of these fields arise concerning the development, research and future of biblical translations for the African continent. Possible solutions to address these problems require that intentional changes to the current curriculum requirements will have to be made and possible flexibility added. If biblical languages are not going to remain a requirement for the PhD in Old and New Testament Studies, then it will not be long before the situation arises that supervisors will be without students, and not long after that, there might be a situation where there will be students without supervisors.

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L.S., is the sole author of this research article.

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