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A Guide to Open Access Theological Resources

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Taylor University
Sacred Roots
White Paper #5



A Guide to Open Access Theological Resources

By Daniel J. Howell

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Inquiries

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Introduction

Over the past twenty years, remarkable growth has occurred in the number of *open access* (as in *freely available*) books and articles in digital format. Several elements are at work to make this possible, including a vision for equitable access to information, the financial support of various organizations to enable small and large-scale digitization, and the diligence of librarians and their supporting institutions. Many resources previously available only to a few are now available to many, and usually without geographic or political boundaries.

Theological resources have benefitted from this development. Although select biblical and theological resources were among early candidates for digitizing, their formats or paywalls often limited their access. Such limitations are diminishing as increased Internet access coupled with property rights and licensing changes make a greater volume of biblical and theological resources freely accessible.

This guide identifies digital tools openly and freely available to all without barriers or cost to the user. Costs to create and to make these tools freely available are often provided through the generosity of organizations and their donors.

The phrase *open access* can entail specific, technical definitions and variations. In principle, *open access* refers to digital, online information available free of charge and usually with less restrictive copyright or licensing barriers than traditional publication. The majority of open access theological or biblical studies e-books reside in the public domain without any copyright or licensing limitations.

This guide does not claim comprehensiveness, but aims to identify key tools for discovering and accessing open access resources. The landscape of discovery and access tools is dynamic. The pool of open access resources is continually changing and, happily, expanding. Consequently, this guide may have benefit for a limited duration and may require revision as new avenues for discovering and accessing theological resources emerge. Additional content suggestions and identification of errors are truly welcome.

It would be ideal if just one source permitted discovery and access to the full range of open access resources. That is not yet a reality. Thus, engaging the full range of open access resources requires utilizing multiple discovery and access tools. Additionally, digital publication wrestles with persistence and preservation. The Internet Archive, and to some extent Google Scholar, can hopefully provide more sustained, longer-term access to e-books and other resources than has been typical in the past.

Basic search examples appear with each resource identified below. These examples can generate long search URLs which have been shortened with <https://v.gd>. This is a reliable URL shortener service that will notify users of the intended link prior to navigating there directly.

Resources to Find and Access E-Books

The resources are presented here in an order reflecting their focus upon theological resources. If you do not find what you are seeking, it is advisable to then search in resources with a broader reach such as Google Books, the Internet Archive, and WorldCat.

Open Access Digital Theological Library

<https://libguides.thedtl.org/oadt1>

The Open Access Digital Theological Library (OADTL) curates quality content in theological and religious studies and related disciplines drawn from many different sources. It is based on WorldCat (listed below) for cataloging, discovery, and retrieval. OADTL presents a powerful and consistent discovery system built upon industry cataloging and retrieval standards.

OADTL provides discovery and access to about 200,000 e-books and millions of articles and chapters. Though there are vast resources to be discovered here, it remains incomplete. One must search Google Books and the Internet Archive for a more comprehensive search.

Notice that from the landing page (<https://libguides.thedtl.org/oadt1>) one can limit searches by type of resource: e.g., books, articles. When searching a topic more broadly, a better approach may be to search both in books and articles and use limiters that can be found in the left margin to refine the search further.

From an entry in OADTL, one can follow a link to the full text.

To learn more about OADTL, you can read this article by its principal agents: <https://serials.atla.com/theolib/article/view/2588>.

Search for: St. Augustine, *Confessions*

Search strategy: au:augustine ti:confessions

au: = search for the author's name
ti: = search for words in the title

This search combination is available in OADTL and in WorldCat. It provides a more direct search strategy.

Result: https://v.gd/oadt1_augconf

To gain access: Click on:

[View eBook](#)

Several options emerge to view or download the ebook.

Christian Classics Ethereal Library

<https://ccel.org>

The Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL) is a digital library providing hundreds of select, classic Christian books.

Books can be read online. Many books are available for download through “Read on Mobile” or other download options. The .epub and .pdf formats can be converted to formats amenable to various e-book readers through sites such as <https://onlineconverter.com>.

Search for: St. Augustine, *Confessions*

Search strategy: augustine confessions

Result: https://v.gd/ccel_augconf

Of particular note, CCEL provides full-text access to the English translation of the Ante-Nicene Fathers and the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (<https://ccel.org/fathers>).

[The classic nineteenth-century original language collection of church fathers edited by Jacques-Paul Migne is available from Google Books and the Internet Archive. Links to specific volumes from the Greek and Latin collections can be found here:

Patrologia Graeca (161 volumes): <https://patristica.net/graeca>

Patrologia Latina (221 volumes): <https://patristica.net/latina>

Google Books

<https://books.google.com>

Google Books is a project that reportedly has digitized approximately forty million books, ten million of which are in the public domain and available for online reading or download. Digitized books still under copyright may be searchable in partial view with the *Preview* option. Searching in a digitized book without full-text access can still be useful for identifying pertinent content within that book, even though it may require alternative means of acquisition.

Google Books is not a perfect tool; there are numerous errors in item descriptions (metadata). However, it yields many available public domain books relating to theology and biblical studies. Even with its search and metadata limitations, Google Books provides unprecedented access to digitized, open access books.

A search by the author’s surname together with a keyword in the title is generally the most effective way to search. Known consecutive words in a title (or anywhere in the full-text) can be searched as a phrase within quotation marks (“...”) to focus the search. In general, do not give up after one search in your quest for a book.

Additionally, Google provides a search page for retrieving books in public domain or available through open access: https://books.google.com/googlebooks/about/free_books.html

Books downloaded in .pdf or .epub formats can also be converted to formats amenable to various devices including e-book readers like Amazon Kindle (.awz). Although there are several online conversion tools, one that is easy, effective, and free is <https://www.onlineconverter.com>.

Search for: Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*

Search strategy: athanasius incarnation
(then limit to “Full View” from pull-down menu near the top left side)

Result: https://v.gd/gbks_ath_incarnation

To gain access: The full text can be read online or downloaded in one of several formats.

Internet Archive

<https://archive.org>

From its inception in 1996, the Internet Archive seeks to build a “digital library of Internet sites and other cultural artifacts in digital form.” This presently includes over six million books including thousands of titles relating to theological and biblical studies. Many books discovered here are available for download in a variety of formats. Additionally, many books still under copyright are available for “borrowing” and reading online after creating a free Internet Archive account.

A notable aspect of the Internet Archive is its goal to provide persistent, archival access to its resources. While digitization has made a vast array of digital resources available, constancy of access can be elusive. Resources on the Internet Archive will, hopefully, remain accessible for the long-term.

A note of caution: The Internet Archive practices virtually no censorship. Consequently, it contains prurient or even pornographic images, videos, and texts. Care and discretion is advised. The safest approach is to go to <https://archive.org/>, enter terms into the search box, and limit your search to “Search text contents.”

Many e-books available from the Internet Archive can be discovered and accessed through the OADTL.

Search for: St. Bernard, *On the Love of God*

Search strategy: bernard love of God

Result: https://v.gd/ia_bernard_love

To gain access: Select from several full-text versions or use the Internet Archive online reader.

WorldCat

<https://worldcat.org>

WorldCat provides a singular tool to discover millions of books, dissertations and other cataloged resources within thousands of libraries worldwide. Only a small fraction of the resources WorldCat identifies are openly accessible, but that number is growing. Books discoverable in WorldCat must be entered by a library that contributes or edits the associated bibliographic record.

WorldCat is a tool without equal for discovering books and other resources across time, geography, and cultures. It is indispensable for conducting extensive research for books by author, subject, or language that extends vastly beyond what is openly accessible. Over time, it is anticipated that many more open access books and resources will be found through WorldCat.

Additionally, WorldCat provides citation generators, persistent links, and bibliography creation.

Although WorldCat does provide an *Open Content/Open Access* limiter (at the top of the left margin with search filters), its results can be dubious. One can often find open access books available through regular searches which do not appear when the *Open Access* limiter is selected. One option is to limit results to e-books using the *Format* filter in the left margin. Note also that many of the linked open access books discovered in WorldCat (and in OADTL) lead one to digitized copies in Google Books, the Internet Archive, and occasionally CCEL.

Fields can be searched by keyword through the use of the following prefixes (field indicators):

au: = author keyword search

ti: = title keyword search

kw: = keyword search (this is the default without another field indicator selected)

su: = subject keyword

pb: = publisher name search

yy: = search by year of publication or range of years (e.g., yy:1990..2024)

Searches can also be readily refined by using the limiters identified in the left margin of the search page.

Search for: St. Anselm, *Proslogium*

Search strategy: au:anselm ti:proslogium

Result: https://v.gd/wc_anselm_prosl

Resources to Find and Access Articles

Finding openly accessible journal articles pertaining to biblical and theological studies is more challenging and often less fruitful than finding e-books. While there is limited growth in open access theological journals, the majority of titles remain proprietary (non-free). Some open access theological journals make only their older articles available (frequently identified as “archive”) or are available only after the journal has suspended or ceased publication. This reality underscores the effort and cost involved in creating and sustaining an open access journal. In select cases, titles that formerly were open access have regressed to proprietary control. Nevertheless, a growing number of higher quality articles are becoming available through open access journals and the efforts of authors working with digital repositories to make their articles available.

For authors wanting to learn more about making your creative work, especially articles, openly accessible, see this information brochure by SPARC: <https://sparcopen.org/our-work/author-rights/brochure-html/>.

Google Scholar and OADTL provide the most comprehensive tools to discover and access open access journal articles.

The Atla Religion Database is the principal index for biblical and theological journal literature and book chapters. It is, however, available only through subscription, generally through seminary and select college or university libraries. Some theological institutions provide ongoing access to the Atla Religion Database for their alumni.

In some cases, access to proprietary digital databases is provided by state, regional or national governments. It can be well worth exploring this sort of availability. Such databases may include some, if limited, access to biblical and theological resources.

Google Scholar

<https://scholar.google.com>

Google Scholar is a principal tool providing web-based discovery to the content of many journals in the areas of STEM, social sciences, and increasingly the humanities, including a growing number in biblical and theological studies. Importantly, Google Scholar provides links to open access articles to the right of the citation. It should be noted that Google Scholar will retrieve select dissertations which may be directly accessible.

Google Scholar provides several helpful features. *Cite* formats a citation in a variety of formats often with accuracy. (You should always check a computer-generated citation for accuracy prior to any academic submission.) *Save* creates a bibliography for you if you are signed into a (free) Google account while searching Google Scholar.

Of special note is Google Scholar's *Cited By* provision which is found under a given result citation. The linked search identifies what other publications have cited that specific article. This often leads to other relevant, more recent publications.

See, for example, the *Cited By* links to this article: Schultz, Katherine G., and James A. Swezey. "A three-dimensional concept of worldview." *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 22, no. 3 (2013): 227–243. [https://v.gd/schultz_worldview]

At the time of writing this there were seventy-seven citations provided from the *Cited By* link (https://v.gd/schultz_worldview_cited_by), several of which included open access content. Although a given resource may not be openly accessible, it may still be useful to explore *Cited By* citations to find relevant, open access articles. In this case, the article itself is openly accessible even though it is published in a proprietary journal.

A basic search operator for Google Scholar (and other Google searches) is the use of *OR* (both letters must be capitalized) to link a string of terms (e.g., faith OR belief OR commitment) which would yield citations containing any of those terms. A space between terms in a Google search

always implies *AND* unless linked with *OR*. So, you could search for articles in which the terms above are present together with the terms “Christian” or “Christianity”:

Christian OR Christianity faith OR belief OR commitment

which translates to

Christian OR Christianity [AND, implied by the space] faith OR belief OR commitment.

See this search: <https://v.gd/WODRt8>

Additionally, phrases can be searched with quotations (e.g., “Christian worldview”) or limited by publication date.

Search for: Articles on Jonathan Edwards’ *Religious Affections*

Search strategy: edwards religious affections

Result: https://v.gd/gs_edwards_affections

To illustrate Google Scholar’s Advanced Search (https://scholar.google.com/#d=gs_asd) capabilities, albeit limited, here is another search.

Search for: Articles pertaining to the use of *logos* or “Word” in John 1

Search strategy: allintitle: logos OR word “john 1”
[“john 1” limits to a phrase search]

This search limits the terms to occurrences in the *title of the article*. Given how Google Scholar is constructed through web crawling without any human intervention, *Advanced Searches* might eliminate extraneous results but can also exclude other relevant results.

Result: https://v.gd/gs_john1_limited

For comparison, see these results of searching for the same terms without the “allintitle” limitation: https://v.gd/gs_john1_full. In this case, beginning the search with the “allintitle” limitation may provide a more practical approach to commence exploring relevant articles. Despite the capabilities of Google’s “relevancy ranking,” it is generally advisable to examine several pages of results even on a non-delimited search.

Although Google Scholar is a valuable resource for discovering open access journal articles it is not exhaustive. A general Google web search (<https://google.com>) may reveal open access articles not discoverable through Google Scholar. Searching the words from the beginning of an article placed in quotations (“...”) can be an effective approach for finding open access to an otherwise proprietary article.

Open Access Digital Theological Library

<https://libguides.thedttl.org/oadt1>

OADTL is also a major resource for discovering and accessing open access journal articles relating to biblical and theological studies. It provides access to millions of articles and chapters from a variety of collections, which can entail duplication in results. If a result contains a broken link, searching for the resource within its associated website's own discovery mechanism (search bar) may yield an updated link.

Because OADTL is built upon WorldCat (and its WorldShare Management Service), a notable benefit over Google Scholar is the ability to employ field searching. The *author* (*au:*), *title* (*ti:*) and *keyword* (*kw:*) fields can be especially useful when searching for articles.

As with access to e-books in OADTL, one simply clicks on the *View full text* tab to access the article or chapter.

View full text

Search for: Articles pertaining to the use of *logos* (or “word”) in the first chapter of the Gospel of John

Search strategy: (x0:artchap) ti: john 1 AND (kw:logos OR kw:word)

This search strategy started with the selection of an “Articles” search in OADTL which automatically inserts the article search parameter indicated by “x0:artchap.” Coupled with this, the search sought articles with “John 1” in the title and either “logos” or “word” (or both) in the citation as a keyword. Observe the parentheses used with connecting “logos” or “word” as a search element.

Result: https://v.gd/oadt1_john1_logos

By searching John 1 in the title with “logos” or “word” as keywords (occurring any place in the record), more results were returned than searching “logos” or “word” also limited to the title: e.g., (x0:artchap) ti: john 1 AND (ti:logos OR ti:word). However, in the broader search many results lack relevance. This underscores the challenge between *recall* (the size of your net or how far you cast it) and *precision* (the relevance of what you catch or retrieve). Searching with the correct terms is vital. How you structure the search (e.g., with field limiters or boolean operators) also matters.

Biblical Studies.org.uk

<https://biblicalstudies.org.uk>

This site provides access to select articles and journal archives, claiming to provide about 45,000 articles searchable by keyword, author, and title. The search engine expresses “enhanced by Google.” Search results are often preceded by advertisements. While the results may appear mixed, articles of relevance are often discoverable.

The list of journals indexed and to which Biblical Studies.org.uk provides full-text access is noteworthy (<https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles.php>). For some journals, access is selective. The site map (<https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/sitemap.php>) enables browsing by author and, to some degree, by title.

Directory of Open Access Journals

<https://doaj.org>

The Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) is an international resource that identifies open access journals searchable by keyword, title, and more. Articles are also searchable by author, keyword, and more.

In general, DOAJ is a secondary research tool compared to OADTL and Google Scholar. However, it is the premier source for discovering peer-reviewed, open access journals.

Search for journals: Journals relating to biblical studies

Search strategy: “Bible” or “biblical” (in All Fields)

Result: https://v.gd/doaj_journals_bible

Search for articles: word or logos in the gospel of john

Search strategy: john gospel word OR logos

Result: https://v.gd/doaj_john_word

Other Sources for Open Access Resources

A growing number of websites offer discovery and access tools for open access books and resources. These range from providing a few titles to scores of titles. Some websites provide a broad scope of search within many collections or repositories. Others focus on a specific subject area or collection. Examples of both types are identified below.

HathiTrust

<https://hathitrust.org>

HathiTrust is “a not-for-profit collaborative of academic and research libraries preserving 18+ million digitized items.” HathiTrust reflects the immense subject scope of its supporting research libraries, and their collections go vastly beyond theological resources. However, it does provide access to many theological resources in the public domain and available for online reading or download. Most resources still under copyright are not available as full text but are available only to authorized users of HathiTrust member libraries.

Even though open access applies only to a small portion of HathiTrust resources, it remains a valuable discovery and access tool. Because it has been developed by librarians with a commitment to industry standards and consistency, it is a powerful search tool with various added capabilities such as citation creation.

From the landing page, note the options for a search in “full text” or the “catalog.” When seeking a specific work or works by an author, it is advisable to use the “Advanced catalog search” interface.


Search for: John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*

Search strategy: With Advanced catalog search,

Author: Bunyan

Title: Pilgrim's Progress

Result: https://v.gd/hathi_bunyan_pilgrims

Notice the multiple editions of the work, all of which have one or more options for  [Full view](#).

A to Z Databases (from the Digital Theological Library) <https://libguides.thedtl.org/az.php>

The Digital Theological Library, of which OADTL is a subset, provides proprietary resources to member libraries, primarily theological libraries. A to Z Databases (AZD) lists databases available through Digital Theological Library membership but also identifies numerous open access resources for theological or biblical research. The latter comprises a majority of the databases identified here.

AZD can be searched through a drop-down box by subject, type (open access or restricted), vendor (including publishers or source), and/or keyword. It does include databases not directly related to theological research. Though many resources require a subscription for access, AZD remains a useful tool to discover select open access resources.

A similar list identifying mostly proprietary resources available through the Graduate Theological Union Library, "A–Z List of Electronic Resources" (<https://www.gtu.edu/library/resources>), also includes select open access databases and repositories, some of which may not be identified in AZD.

Aggregated Search Platforms, Institutional Repositories, and Other Specialized Digital Collections

A growing number of projects from theological institutions, theological libraries, and consortia collect, digitize, and make openly accessible e-books and other resources. Many of the fruits of such efforts can be discovered through tools already identified such as the Internet Archive and OADTL.

However, many of these projects continue to add resources so far undiscoverable by other means. A more comprehensive tool is needed that identifies such resources for theological research. There are several search platforms that attempt to aggregate the resources from many digital repositories and collections focusing upon theological and related artifacts.

Atla: Explore Religion and Theology Collections

<https://dl.atla.com/?locale=en>

The Atla Digital Library provides a search platform to numerous digital collections from libraries, religious organizations, and other entities for "historical and archival content in religion

and theology.” It currently identifies over 125,000 images, texts, videos and sounds from eighty-three collection sources.

Globethics.net Library: Theology and Ecumenism

<https://v.gd/vLhzKC>

The Globethics.net Library is a search vehicle that draws from over three thousand open access repositories. It identifies over four million documents, including articles, books, reference works, dissertations, conference proceedings, and other resources focusing upon applied ethics and religious studies with a global perspective, especially the Global South. The URL above links to the “Theology and Ecumenism” collection.

The Lens

<https://lens.org>

The Lens is a rapidly growing, powerful tool to discover and access a vast range of resources, now encompassing more than 225 million scholarly works. Its coverage of open access literature in the natural sciences and social sciences is immense, but it also extends to the humanities, including theological resources. In most cases, it is advisable to search first in the resources identified at the beginning of this guide. However, a search in the Lens can yield results that may not surface in other discovery tools. A benefit of the Lens is that it also includes a vast range of proprietary resources, including articles and book chapters that may benefit research.

The Lens provides numerous filters and other ways to refine searches. See, for example, the open access filter in the left margin. Initially, the Lens can be somewhat overwhelming to use, but with a little exploration and a few search attempts one can gain confidence in using it.

Search for: Books and articles on the *Book of Common Prayer*

Search strategy: “book of common prayer” (in quotations as a phrase)

Result: https://v.gd/lens_bocp

Select List of Digital Theological Repositories

Many resources in specific repositories are discoverable and accessible through one or more tools identified in this white paper. It is also possible that additional resources not yet discoverable through other means can be found by searching a specific repository. Here is a sampling of sites that may be useful:

Theological Commons (Princeton Theological Seminary): <https://commons.ptsem.edu>. Many Theological Commons titles are discoverable through OADTL or the Internet Archive.

First Fruits (Asbury Theological Seminary): <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/firstfruits/>

Wesleyan-Holiness Digital Library: <http://www.whdl.org/>

Boyce Digital Repository (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary):
<https://repository.sbts.edu/>

Pitts Theology Library, Digital Collections (Emory University):
https://v.gd/pitts_dc_0222

David Allan Hubbard Library, Digital Archives (Fuller Theological Seminary):
<https://cdm16677.contentdm.oclc.org/digital>

World Evangelical Alliance Resources (Martin Bucer Seminary):
<https://www.bucer.de/ressourcen/wea-cd.html>

Finding Dissertations and Theses

There are many theses and dissertations submitted for seminary and postgraduate academic degrees in theology and biblical studies. These can be fruitful especially for more specialized studies and for the bibliography that a dissertation may provide. A majority of these are not openly accessible, although a growing number are, principally through institutional repositories.

ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global is the major international indexing resource for dissertations (and also the source to purchase most of the indexed titles). It is, however, proprietary and primarily accessible through academic libraries supporting advanced research.

There are several growing and openly accessible tools to discover theses and dissertations which provide open access to the full text, usually from an institutional or collaborative repository. Key among such resources are the following.

EThOS (E-Theses Online) (The British Library): <https://ethos.bl.uk/>
[EthOS was affected by a cyberattack on the British Library in October 2023. It remains offline as of April 2024 but, hopefully, will be restored.]

Open Access Theses and Dissertations: <https://oatd.org/>
Search: “gospel of mark”: https://v.gd/oatd_mark (176 records)

Open Dissertations (EBSCO): <https://biblioboard.com/opendissertations/>
Search: “gospel of mark”: <https://v.gd/TDKVel> (fifty-three records)

There are many Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) projects that often focus upon applied or practical theology. The Atla resource Research in Ministry (<https://rim.atla.com>) indexes thousands of such projects. It does not, however, provide full-text access.

An expanding number of institutions (usually through their libraries) provide full-text access to theses and dissertations, including some that may be discovered through Research in Ministry. This may require exploring the library website (and library catalog) of the institution to which the thesis, dissertation, or project was submitted.

The Theological Research Exchange Network (TREN) (<https://www.tren.com/>) provides access to theological thesis and dissertation titles (now over 26,000) from some 150 institutions, many of which can be discovered through Research in Ministry or from the TREN site. Although these are not openly accessible, they are available at a modest cost with a growing percentage of titles available in digital format.