# Essays on Faithbased Scholarship from the SBL Forum

## Bible Scholarship and Faith-Based Study: My View

**Michael V. Fox (http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=490)**

Recently, claims have been made for the legitimacy of faith-based scholarship in the forum of academic scholarship (on a related issue, see the recent FORUM article by Mary Bader and the responses to it). In my view, faith-based study has no place in academic scholarship, whether the object of study is the Bible, the Book of Mormon, or Homer. Faith-based study is a different realm of intellectual activity that can dip into Bible scholarship for its own purposes, but cannot contribute to it. I distinguish faith-based Bible study from the scholarship of persons who hold a personal faith. In our field, there are many religious individuals whose scholarship is secular and who introduce their faith only in distinctly religious forums.

Faith-based study of the Bible certainly has its place — in synagogues, churches, and religious schools, where the Bible (and whatever other religious material one gives allegiance to) serves as a normative basis of moral inspiration or spiritual guidance. This kind of study is certainly important, but it is not scholarship — by which I mean *Wissenschaft*, a term lacking in English that can apply to the humanities as well as the hard sciences, even if the modes and possibilities of verification in each are very different. (It would be strange, I think, to speak of a "faith-based *Wissenschaft*.")

Any discipline that deliberately imports extraneous, inviolable axioms into its work belongs to the realm of homiletics or spiritual enlightenment or moral guidance or whatnot, but not scholarship, whatever academic degrees its practitioners may hold. Scholarship rests on evidence. Faith, by definition, is belief when evidence is absent. "There can ... be no faith concerning matters which are objects of rational knowledge, for knowledge excludes faith" (thus Aquinas, as paraphrased by the *Enc. of Philosophy* 3.165). And evidence must be accessible and meaningful apart from the unexaminable axioms, and it must not be merely generated by its own premises. (It is not evidence in favor of the Quran's divine origin that millions of people believe it deeply, nor is it evidence of its inerrancy that the it proclaims itself to be "the Scripture whereof there is no doubt.") To be sure, everyone has presuppositions and premises, but these are not inviolable. Indeed, it is the role of education to teach students how to recognize and test their premises and, when necessary, to reject them.

Faith-based Bible study is not part of scholarship even if some of its postulates turn out to be true. If scholarship, such as epigraphy and archaeology, should one day prove the existence of a Davidic empire, faith-based study will have had no part in the discovery (even if some epigraphers incidentally hold faith of one sort or another) because it starts with the conclusions it wishes to reach.

There is an atmosphere abroad in academia (loosely associated with postmodernisms) that tolerates and even encourages ideological scholarship and advocacy instruction.

Some conservative religionists have picked this up. I have heard students, and read authors, who justify their biases by the rhetoric of postmodern self-indulgence. Since no one is viewpoint neutral and every one has presuppositions, why exclude Christian presuppositions? Why allow the premise of errancy but not of inerrancy? Such sophistry can be picked apart, but the climate does favor it.

The claim of faith-based Bible study to a place at the academic table takes a toll on the entire field of Bible scholarship. The reader or student of Bible scholarship is likely to suspect (or hope) that the author or teacher is moving toward a predetermined conclusion. Those who choose a faith-based approach should realize that they cannot expect the attention of those who don't share their postulates. The reverse is not true. Scholars who are personally religious constantly draw on work by scholars who do not share their postulates. One of the great achievements of modern Bible scholarship is that it communicates across religious borders so easily that we usually do not know the beliefs of its practitioners.

Trained scholars quickly learn to recognize which authors and publications are governed by faith and tend to set them aside, not out of prejudice but out of an awareness that they are irrelevant to the scholarly enterprise. Sometimes it is worthwhile to go through a faith-motivated publication and pick out the wheat from the chaff, but time is limited.

The best thing for Bible appreciation is secular, academic, religiously-neutral hermeneutic. (I share Jacques Berlinerblau's affirmation of the secular hermeneutic [*The Secular Bible*, Cambridge, 2005], review here, but not his ideas about what it constitutes or where it leads). Secular scholarship allows the Bible to be seen as a rich and vital mixture of texts from an ancient people in search of God and moral culture. Its humanness — and primitiveness — can allow us both to recognize and make allowances for some of its uglier moments (Lev 18:22, for example or Deut 20:10-20, or much of Joshua). These things would (in my view) be abhorrent coming from the Godhead, but tolerable when viewed (and dismissed) as products of human imperfection and imagination in an ancient historical context.

We are in a time when pseudo-scientific claims are demanding a place in the science curriculum, and biologists and zoologists cannot afford to ignore them. Similar voices wish to insert themselves into academic Bible scholarship, and serious adherents of *Bibelwissenschaft* should likewise offer opposition.

**Michael V. Fox,** University of Wisconsin, Madison.

## The Unspeakable in Biblical Scholarship

**Jacques Berlinerblau (http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=503)**

I read Professor Michael Fox's recent contribution to the *SBL Forum* ("Biblical Scholarship and Faith-based Study: My View") with appreciation and glee. Appreciation, because the piece evinces his characteristically level headed, sober, albeit provocative, style. Glee, because Professor Fox has called attention to a topic that is virtually taboo in biblical scholarship. I disagree strongly with some parts of his analysis. Yet I sense that his remarks may be a cause and an effect of a significant change. We are, after all, conducting this dialogue on the web page of the Society for Biblical Literature — an organization that has traditionally shown itself to be somewhat impervious to the charms of both self-reflexive scrutiny and secularism.

The unspeakable that I allude to in my title concerns what we might label the demographic peculiarities of the academic discipline of biblical scholarship. Addressing this very issue thirty years ago, M.H. Goshen-Gottstein observed: "However we try to ignore it — practically all of us are in it because we are either Christians or Jews." [1] In the intervening decades, very little has changed. Biblicists continue to be professing (or once-professing) Christians and Jews. They continue to ignore the fact that the relation between their own religious commitments and their scholarly subject matter is wont to generate every imaginable conflict of intellectual interest. Too, they still seem oblivious to how strange this state of affairs strikes their colleagues in the humanities and social sciences.

Be that as it may, we Biblicists — perhaps I should say *you* Biblicists — are a fascinating and sometimes laudably heretical lot. How many times have exegetes inadvertently come to conclusions that imperiled the dogmas of the religious groups to which they belonged? In *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously*, I ascribed a heroic function to biblical scholars, depicting them as (unwitting) agents of secular modernity.
I would note that Julius Wellhausen and William Robertson Smith were most decidedly *not* Voltaire and Marx. They were not cultured despisers of religion, but profoundly pious individuals. It is a world-historical irony that their heresies played a role in the continuing secularization of the Occident. Subsequent generations of Biblicists have followed suit, and by dint of their efforts they have legitimated and routinized the right of an individual to criticize the sacred. [2] As recent current events indicate, this is no mere cartoon heroism.

All honor, then, is due to believing critics past and present. This is why, incidentally, I deplore the current secular chic of denigrating all forms of religious thought. Indeed, the tendency of today's Celebrities of Nonbelief to depict theistic thinkers as dupes and imbeciles actually exemplifies the cultural impoverishment (and desperation) of today's freethinking movements. Secular intellectual culture is moored in the 90s, and by this I mean the 1890s. A more serious engagement with religious thought would serve it well.

But this does not mean that all is well with modern biblical research. For believing criticism should not be the most extreme form of religious criticism. In order to expand upon this point, let me return to Fox's piece. In his article he drew a distinction between faith-based Bible study and the "secular, academic, religiously neutral hermeneutic." We would both agree that faith-based Bible study has every right to take place in seminaries and religiously chartered institutions. I am a bit concerned, as I imagine he might be, by the degree to which explicitly confessional researchers sit on editorial boards of major journals, steering committees, search committees, and the hierarchy of the Society of Biblical Literature.

To their credit, however, faith-based scholars are often cognizant that they are engaged in a confessional enterprise. It is another category of Biblicist that, to my mind, is far more problematic. It is comprised of researchers who in every facet of their private lives are practicing Jews or Christians, but who — somehow — deny that this may influence their professional scholarly work (which just happens to concern those documents that are the fount of Judaism and Christianity!). This category extends to researchers in ancient Near Eastern Studies, who, anecdotally, are often very conservative in their religious views. It also applies, with some sectarian modifications, to many members of the American Academy of Religion. I am always amused to hear how some higher-ups in the latter society complain about the religious conservatism of the SBL — as if the AAR embodies the blasphemous spirit of Jean-Paul Sartre, Chairman Mao, and the Oakland Raiders of the 70s.

But I am digressing. When Fox speaks of a "secular academic, religiously-neutral hermeneutic," I can only wonder from where this hermeneutic is supposed to emerge. In this discipline, there is no organic sociological base from which such an approach can develop. And this is because nearly every single one of my colleagues has entered this discipline *qua* Christian or Jew. (True, they sometimes exit as something else, but that's another story altogether.) What results is a situation in which biblical scholarship's "secular" wing is more like a reform religious or liberal religious wing. If one of the classic definitions of secularism centers on the holding of agnostic or atheistic beliefs, then biblical scholarship (and religious studies in general) is "secular" in a way that no other discipline in the Academy is secular. Does this invalidate the findings of biblical scholarship? Absolutely not. It does, however, point to a collective ideational drift in the field, one that makes it difficult to think or speak about Scripture in certain ways.

Now we can better identify what is not well with biblical scholarship. Composed almost entirely of faith-based researchers on one extreme and "secularists" on the other, the field itself is structurally preconditioned to make heretical insight difficult to generate and secular research nearly impossible. To the non-believing undergraduate who tells me that he or she wants to go into biblical studies, I respond (with Dante and Weber) *lasciate ogni speranza*. This is not so much because they will encounter discrimination. They might, but if my experiences are representative, they will more frequently be the beneficiaries of the kindness of pious strangers. There is a much more mundane reason for prospective non-theist Biblicists to abandon hope: there are no jobs for them.

Assume for a moment that you are an atheist exegete. Now please follow my instructions. Peruse the listings in *Openings*. Understand that your unique skills and talents are of no interest to those institutions listed there with the words "Saint" and "Holy" and "Theological" and "Seminary" in their names. This leaves, per year, about two or three advertised posts in biblical studies at religiously un-chartered institutions of higher learning. Apply for those jobs. Get rejected. A few months later learn — preferably while consuming donuts with a colleague — that the position was filled by a graduate of a theological seminary. Realize that those on the search committee who made this choice all graduated from seminaries themselves. Curse the gods.

Before this response begins to sound like the prelude to a class-action suit, permit me to observe that the type of discrimination encountered by secularists in biblical studies *is precisely what believers working in the humanities and social sciences have endured for decades.* The secular bent and bias of the American research university is well known. It is undeniable that many of its workers are prejudiced against sociologists, English professors, and art historians who are "too" religious. I do not know what the solution is, but I do know that two major neglected questions in our profession concern how religious belief interacts with scholarly research and how secular universities manage the study of religion.

In closing, let me mention that in recent years I have increasingly noted the presence in both societies of a small, but growing cadre of non-believers, heretics, and malcontents. Whether we have anything of substance to offer our disciplines remains to be seen. Of course, this begs the question of whether our colleagues will ever consent to listen to us.

**Jacques Berlinerblau**, Georgetown University/Hofstra University

**Endnotes**

1. M.H. Goshen-Gottstein, "Christianity Judaism, and Modern Bible Study," *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1975) 83 (68-88).

2. These arguments are elaborated upon in my "'Poor Bird, Not Knowing Which Way to Fly': Biblical Scholarship's Marginality, Secular Humanism, and the Laudable Occident," *Biblical Interpretation* 10 (2002) 267-304, and *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 70-73, 116-129.

## Response from Michael V. Fox

**(http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=521)**

I appreciate the responses to my op-ed piece on Bible Scholarship and Faith-Based Study. It's an important issue to all of us and one we should think through together. The issues, especially the epistemological ones, demand deeper scrutiny. Here I offer just a few responses, not entirely identified by correspondent.

Rev. Brassey confuses opinions with faith. An opinion, moral or aesthetic, is not the same as a principle of faith. Opinions are not normative and they do not compel certain readings. They also are adaptable and responsive to evidence. My negative evaluation of the law in Lev 20:13 doesn't make me construe the verse differently. Opinions are not axioms or arguments. Faith, as indicated by the phrase "faith based," is indeed axiomatic and excludes those who do not share the particular faith in question.

That is not to say that scholarship is devoid of axioms. There are of course, as Adam Wells says, scholarly axioms or postulates outside scholarship. Gödel's incompleteness theorem guarantees it. An example of a postulate external to the system, cited by Wells, is that "scholarship rests on evidence." That is a meta-scholarly postulate, one of many on which scholarship is founded, but such postulates too are open to adjudication and adjustment. Rather different than saying that "true interpretation rests on divine inspiration" (Qumran) or "true interpretation rests on accepting the divine source of every word in the Bible" (Rabbis) or "the Bible told me so" (lots of preachers).

Adam Wells paraphrases me as saying that "an interpretation is truly scholarship if and only if it pertains to verifiable evidence." That sounds right. (Note: "pertains to," not "fully accounts for all.") To be sure, in the humanities "verification" is inevitably flexible, fuzzy, and probabilistic. But if someone wants to make arguments exempt of the duty of evidence, I'm not interested.

Contrary to Rodney Duke and Ronald Troxel, I did not say that secular Bible scholarship is a "value-neutral activity" or "postulate free," nor did I call for a "neutral hermeneutic." I was calling for a religiously neutral hermeneutic. Other presuppositions and goals — concepts of historical development, gender construction, and economic determinism, for example — can be discussed and probed by shared criteria. These are all realities of the human realm and open to examination, correction, and evidence. But the rules change once you bring God into the picture. Claims founded on God's nature, will, activity, and particular communications to privileged groups are dead-end roads for all but the faithful. They are not accessible to the kind of critique that Rodney Duke rightly calls for.

It must be granted that much of the most valuable scholarship in our field has been permeated by religious agendas, often unrecognized. This is a special problem of our field, but it is not overwhelming. Scholarship, such as nineteenth century German endeavors, had all sorts of religious presuppositions and agendas, but its arguments were usually based on a secular frame. That's why Jews could use it too, in spite of its

Protestant (and sometimes anti-Semitic) biases. But at present most of us write in the secular mode for academic audiences.

I do not know if Prof. K. L. Noll is right about the corrosive power of the academic study of religion on the relevance of revelation, though there are undoubtedly conceptions of revelation that are not so fragile. But that issue belongs to theology, and thank God I'm not a theologian.

I especially appreciate James E. Bowley's introducing the issue of teaching and emphasizing that the common ground of secularity is crucial to Bible teaching in a diverse university. That brings us back to the essay that got this riff started, Mary Bader's "Strategies for Moving Students from Faith-based to Academic Biblical Studies" (http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=467). Bader seeks to teach critical thinking and to "introduce academic biblical scholarship as a new language that can be shared by all students, regardless of their faith backgrounds or lack thereof."

For those of us who teach in state-sponsored universities, secularity in the classroom is essential to professional integrity — and effectiveness. In that setting, presuppositions of faith stifle honest communication, and rational analysis gives way to pronouncements and preachments, often of an angry sort.

Clearly the "faith-base" advocates have an agenda that reaches into the classroom, including in the secular university. (Or do they have a special religiously neutral hermeneutic for use in teaching?) In this context, faith-based teaching amounts to religious propaganda to a captive audience. Secularity has been, if I may put it this way, a great blessing to Bible study and research, for it allow its practitioners and teachers to work together with full and open communication. This seems like a rather important "pragmatic" argument.

Finally, why do we talk about faith-based Bible scholarship in a vacuum? If faith-generated axioms are valid in Bible study, they should be valid everywhere, including Sanskritology, Classics, linguistics, law and (guess what) biology. Or is our field to receive a special dispensation, along with the condescension that attends such concessions? Most of us do not want it or need it, but I fear that Rev. Brassey may be uncomfortably close to the truth when he asserts that "Faith, in fact, is everywhere in biblical studies."

## More discussion of Faith-Based Scholarship (http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=507)

Many people have written to Forum about Michael Fox's article on Bible Scholarship and Faith-Based Study. In addition, Fox's article has prompted discussions in the blogging community. Danny Zacharias has compiled an informal list of these discussions at Deinde.

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Professor Fox argues that biblical scholarship, as true *Wissenschaft*, relies on evidence whose meaning and significance is not intentionally predetermined by the *Weltanschauung* of the scholar. Faith-based biblical study, which "deliberately imports extraneous, inviolable axioms" and does not ultimately rely on evidence, is therefore not real scholarship. The upshot of this view, according to Fox, is that "critical scholarship" can be differentiated from the ever-increasing litany of ethically suspect and/or ideologically motivated biblical interpretations. Although I sympathize with Fox's ire toward interpretive solipsism and ethically repugnant fundamentalism, I find his positivistic conception of *Bibelwissenschaft* extremely problematic.

Fox's claim that "scholarship rests on evidence" is essentially a reworked version of the positivist idea that meaning is linked to verifiability. For the positivist, an assertion is truly meaningful if and only if it is verifiable; similarly, for Fox, an interpretation is truly scholarship if and only if it pertains to verifiable evidence. Given Fox's reliance on positivism, it should come as no surprise that his conception of scholarship displays the same self-referential incoherence that plagues the entire positivist project. Consider the claim that all "scholarship rests on evidence." Is that a scholarly statement? If it is scholarly then, according to Fox, there should be some evidence to support it; but of course there can be no verifiable evidence for a normative claim like "scholarship rests on evidence." Hence, Fox's programmatic statement of what constitutes scholarship is not itself scholarly, but rather a non-scholarly import! Fox's conception of Bible scholarship is therefore open to the exact same critique leveled against faith-based study: "Any discipline that deliberately imports extraneous, inviolable axioms into its work belongs [not] to the realm [of] scholarship." And here the self-referential incoherence is clear: Scholarship, as Fox envisions it, does not belong to the realm of scholarship.

All of this is to say that *Bibelwissenschaft*has its own inviolable axioms and in no way constitutes a realm of scientific objectivity or "real" scholarship, as Fox imagines. The real question as I see it is not whether *Wissenschaft* is compatible with faith-based study, but whether we should strive for a scientific perspective on the Bible at all. What is gained by Fox's *Bibelwissenschaft*? We certainly do not need it in order effectively to critique fundamentalist interpretations of scripture, nor is it required to combat those who "justify their biases by the rhetoric of postmodern self-indulgence." Additionally, if we deny faith-based Bible study a place at the academic table, we run the risk of restricting the benefits of biblical scholarship to a relatively small esoteric group. I would much rather include faith-based study in the academy (within reason), so that we might confront harmful interpretations head-on.

*Adam Wells, Yale University*

I appreciate the publication of the provocative article by Michael Fox, "Bible Scholarship and Faith-Based Study: My View." I think I understand the point he makes, when he states, "We are in a time when pseudo-scientific claims are demanding a place in the science curriculum, and biologists and zoologists cannot afford to ignore them. Similar voices wish to insert themselves into academic Bible scholarship, and serious adherents of *Bibelwissenschaft* should likewise offer opposition." He appears to be responding to the naive and popular level of relativism currently being embraced in Western, "postmodern" culture. I concur.

However, I find his claim, "The best thing for Bible appreciation is secular, academic, religiously-neutral hermeneutic," to be weak in its uncritical acceptance of the rationalism of modernity. At the epistemological level, there is no foundation for a neutral hermeneutic. One cannot escape presuppositions (faith-based assumptions) about the nature of reality, the limits of knowledge, the capabilities of reason, the nature of truth, verification, or the adequacy of language. Rather than claiming that one is ever neutral, I would prefer to challenge my students and myself to keep identifying and examining our presuppositions and to keep asking how they influence interpretation. At that point, we are engaging in critical scholarship.

*Rodney Duke, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC*

My colleague Michael Fox and I have discussed his article on "Bible Scholarship and Faith-Based Study," and he has encouraged me to submit my own response.

While I concur that teaching in a pluralistic setting requires avoiding questions of faith(s), I balk at my esteemed colleague's claim that "secular" Bible study is a value-neutral activity that marks it alone as scholarship. While I hold no brief for including "faith-based" Bible study in the SBL, it is important to recognize that "secular" study of the Bible is not a postulate-free enterprise. In fact, the most commonly practiced form of "secular" study requires subscription to a set of "beliefs" held by a community.

Historical-critical study postulates that 1) a literary work is most authentically read in light of what we know about the social, political, and historical milieu in which it was composed; 2) questions about its contemporary relevance are not germane; 3) the valuation of such works as sacred texts is irrelevant. These postulates are every bit as determinative of outcomes as the postulates of religious communities, and they provide their own curbs on novelty. For example, concluding that Isaiah's commission to forecast the complete depopulation of the land (Isa 6) is intelligible only as some sort of divinely inspired prediction of the Babylonian desolation of Judah would be judged invalid because it invokes a postulate excluded by the community.

On the other hand, it is untrue that religious communities do not value novelty. Working within their accepted postulates, there is much freedom to discover new readings of biblical texts, as has been shown by some communities' willingness to authorize the ordination of women, permit remarriage after divorce, and fully include gays and lesbians.

The differences between study of the Bible in secular and religious circles should not be viewed under the rubrics of superior vs. inferior, but as different sets of postulates and correlative parameters for readings accepted by communities. True, "secular" study of the Bible has provided a more inclusive community on some levels, but that pragmatic argument is hardly proof that it alone has a claim to be scholarship. Moreover, many (particularly feminist scholars) have reasonably argued that historical-critical study entails its own mechanisms of exclusion.

The larger issue lurking in the background, of course, is whether, and how, we can decide which types of readings are pertinent within the SBL. That, however, is another discussion.

*Ronald L. Troxel, University of Wisconsin-Madison*

**In Response to the Fox article**
**(http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=502)**

Bible Scholarship and Faith-Based Study: My View
by Michael V. Fox

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Professor Fox is undoubtedly one of the leading authorities in biblical studies today. He is both Jewish and a distinguished scholar. That is just the appropriate combination for a discussion regarding the tension between faith and science. As a religious Jewish scholar, who engages with biblical study in Israel, I'm inclined to agree with most of his positions. The rule is: Don't be correct, Be wise. When speaking in public in front of worshippers in the synagogue, the speaker must not try to be provocative or deal in his derasha (homily or sermon) with source criticism or the historicity of the Hebrew Bible. These discussions should be held in the universities, colleges and other academic institutions. The opposite is true as well: In the classes held in academic institutions, there is no place for homilies or apologetics.

That is all true, but there are also some limitations. I've heard more than once the claim that certain scholars are uncritical, since they do not accept some postulations regarding, say, the Deuteronomistic History hypothesis. That is of course another matter. Not accepting some assumption held in biblical studies does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that a certain scholar is uncritical. Many times, evidence for such hypotheses is assumed rather than presented. It is refreshing to read from time to time articles or dissertations where the conclusions of modern research are contested or refuted, and we may come to the conclusion that until now we have gone in an erroneous direction. In such cases, prejudice is being exhibited by those who call themselves "critical scholars." If I do not adhere to Martin Noth or Wellhausen, am I "non-critical"? Do I necessarily let my religious beliefs influence my scientific judgments? I doubt that. You do not have to be secular in order to be objective or "critical". The challenge is greater when you are both religious and a scholar teaching and working in a university.

I try as much as I can to differentiate between my religious beliefs and my academic work. But let's be frank: Can anyone be totally objective? Biblical critics worldwide have different agendas, different teachers, different views of morality, and so on. The ability to persuade and reason does not lie only with non-religious or even atheist scholars. Let us not forget that many of the great interpretations are to be assigned to Jewish medieval commentators.

*Michael Avioz, Bar-Ilan University, Israel.*

I commend Michael Fox on his concern for a "scientific" approach to biblical scholarship, but I would question his premise that every measure of "unscientific" consideration should be sidelined in the discussion. Just as he seems wary of those who would offer pseudo-science to the realms of the biologist or zoologist, might we be a bit out of line to eliminate the philosopher or theologian from the realms of faith? The kind of evidence we value in viewing the world or examining the witness of history is indeed worthy of our most diligent analysis and debate, but count me among those who dare to think it awkward to presume we would ever exclude the mystery from such a process. Every time I pursue the hard sciences to the extremes of present knowledge, I find room for something more. The way our knowledge informs our responses is always subject to the measure of moral and ethical choices. Cold hard facts will always need an interpreter of meaning for the times.

*Ronald M. Hinson, Jr. Ph.D., Lenoir, North Carolina.*

As an academically trained Bible scholar now working in a church setting, I have rather a different perspective from that articulated by Professor Fox. I think that the opposition of "faith-based" versus "academic" represents a false dichotomy. I think the term "faith-based" has become a code phrase for a politically and religiously conservative point of view, and that "academic" simply refers to unquestioned advocacy of non-conservative postulates.

Mr. Fox argues for a "secular, academic, religiously-neutral hermeneutic." He then admits that although he borrows the term from Jacques Berlinerblau, he disagrees with "his ideas about what it constitutes or where it leads." This in itself is fascinating: the hermeneutic being advocated is apparently not scientific, but is rooted in personal preferences, of which Fox identifies one: Much that happens in the book of Joshua "would (in my view) be abhorrent coming from the Godhead, but tolerable when viewed (and dismissed) as products of human imperfection and imagination in an ancient historical context." Precisely. The scholar of religion cannot escape from making personal value and moral judgments about the topic at hand. Fox's declaration of abhorrence represents a theological, i.e., faith-based judgment.

Faith, in fact, is everywhere in biblical studies. Countless scholarly Old Testament introductions contain declarations that the theological inadequacies in that corpus are to be resolved in the New Testament, or that the Old Testament points toward or prefigures the New. Jewish scholars (somehow, we know they are Jewish) write articles and monographs lambasting the predominance of Protestant Christian ideology in the study of the Hebrew Bible. Some scholars put their faith in social-scientific perspectives, others in feminism. The very choice of method seems driven by the scholar's predispositions.

Consider the scholar teaching in a theological seminary. Her mission is to train professional leaders of faith communities. She moves freely from the classroom, where she delivers her "academic" perspective, to the chapel, where she might preach on the text just dissected. These regions of the seminary, or the college, or the community, are not hermetically sealed. Comments on the chapel sermon will leak into the classroom, into the dining hall.

That there will be a tomorrow is not a fact; an asteroid might collide with the planet, or the long-dreaded nuclear holocaust might ignite. Nonetheless, we behave as though tomorrow will arrive much as did today, and that our feminist, Marxist, or socialist world-views will help keep our jobs and our reputations safe. If that's not faith, then faith has no definition.

*Rev. Dr. Paul D. Brassey, Director of Music Ministries, St. Mark Lutheran Church, Lacey, Washington*

Many thanks to the editors of *The SBL Forum* for publishing the fine essay by Michael V. Fox, "Bible Scholarship and Faith-based Study." While I agree almost entirely with Dr. Fox's sensible comments, I think that when this topic is discussed, it is dishonest of us "secular" types not to stress the nature of the universal acid we administer. Academic study of the Bible, beginning with Baruch de Spinoza, demonstrates that divine revelation is not a sound epistemology. It is not merely that we do not buy into the faith affirmations of a religious community, but rather that academic research into the Bible, the Qur'an, the book of Mormon, etc., dismantles the notion that revelation (even if genuine) is of any value, religious or otherwise. This is why the advocates of faith-based study get impatient with us. They are entitled to be impatient. Nevertheless, if they attempt to undo the destruction of revelation by participating in academic research, they unwittingly undermine their faith affirmation, since any attempt to "prove" the truth of revelation will undermine the claim that it is, in fact, revelation. Religion is not destroyed by academe, but the notion of revelation is destroyed. And there is no need to mourn the loss of that false claim to authority in the lives of people.

Shalom,
*K. L. Noll, Religion Department, Brandon University, Brandon, Manitoba.*

I offer whole-hearted appreciation and strong support for Professor Fox's articulation of what makes biblical study genuine, academic scholarship. Scholarship of any kind that has predetermined outcomes or required ideological results is pseudo-scholarship; it is either dishonest, not admitting that its conclusions are predetermined, or it is insignificant rhetorical exercise, merely creating new ways of restating the same conclusions. "Faith-based," AKA sectarian scholarship often fits this description. Furthermore, faith-based scholarship is frequently unethical/unjust in that it operates with double standards, accepting its own conclusions easily and often "by faith," while subjecting opposing conclusions (or opposing religions) to rigorous rational critique.

I am much more sympathetic to sectarian scholarship when it is honest and forthcoming about the conclusions it affirms before it begins, but we ought not to call it free, open, liberal scholarship. I am also aware that many scholars of personal faith find ways to conduct genuine open scholarship.

Genuinely open scholarship, which is often mistaken and always learning, moves from conclusion to conclusion, over time admitting it's own mistakes and critiquing it's own methods and assumptions. It uses only rationally shared methods and avoids discrediting mechanisms that privilege one person's religious commitment over another's.

Fox notes that faith-based scholars have attempted to capitalize on postmodernist rhetoric. This is highly ironic and sometimes laughable, since to do so often involves misunderstandings of the writings of scholars such as Derrida, especially his late works, and the work of Levinas.

Finally, I would bolster Fox's argument in a positive fashion, by reflecting on my own classroom experiences, which have been in both sectarian and non-sectarian environments. Only in a non-sectarian classroom, where no faith-based interpretations are privileged, do I find that all my students can participate on equal footing in the learning process. It is only here that my Hindu and my Southern Baptist students can come as equally respected participants in the conversation, who both must learn the languages, and do the hard and rewarding work of historians and philologists (and more), in order to better understand the ancient texts to which we have dedicated so much of our lives. It is in these situations that all my students enjoy drinking deeply the draughts of talmud torah.

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## Strategies for Moving Students from Faith-based to Academic Biblical Studies

**Mary Bader (http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=467)**

### Introduction

This article introduces and discusses two course-embedded assessment techniques (CAT) that I have developed related to students' prior knowledge.[1] It demonstrates how utilizing such surveys can assist liberal arts' faculty in our endeavor to meet a number of goals in an introductory Biblical Studies course; specifically,

- They aid the students in articulating what they understand the Bible to be;
- They prompt students to consider the origins of their opinions/beliefs;
- They allow students to imagine and to see the religious diversity in the classroom and beyond; and
- They have proven to be effective means of introducing how a course in biblical studies in the context of a liberal arts college classroom is different from faith-based Torah or Bible Study.

### Background

When I first began teaching at the College of Wooster, I realized that I was in new territory. Having previously taught at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois, and with the entirety of my own graduate work having been completed in theological schools, I had not yet navigated the waters of teaching the Bible from a more secular non-doctrinal background. To help me think through this issue more carefully, I applied successfully for a Wabash Center Fellowship; this paper represents the work I completed with them. I acknowledge the gracious support they have provided for me. Additionally, since my years at Dominican, I have been interested in assessment, having served on the Assessment Committee at The College of Wooster; a mini-grant from them also helped me develop this work.

### My Course: Introduction to Biblical Studies

The College of Wooster is a private liberal arts college in Wooster, Ohio; I teach at least three sections of Introduction to Biblical Studies per academic year. It is a class that meets the religious perspectives core curriculum requirement. In the seven semesters that I have taught at The College of Wooster, 344 students have taken the course.

Teaching Introduction to Biblical Studies can be both exhilarating and the most challenging experience![2] Each class of thirty-plus students is a microcosm of the world. The evangelical Christian, who is adamant that the Bible is the inerrant infallible normative Word of God, sits next to the person who thinks the Bible is outdated nonsense. The Wiccan student is in close proximity to religious and secular Jews. A handful of Muslim and Hindi students sit alongside the Rasta, Goth, and atheist. Overlay this mix with the growing numbers who literally have never entered a synagogue, mosque, or church and it becomes obvious that they come together with differing goals and starting points. Some come apologetic for their lack of background knowledge; others are convinced they are experts on biblical interpretation. Many have never had the opportunity to consider that the word "Scripture" may mean something entirely different to the person sitting next to them. They do not realize that different canons exist.

Regardless of background, no one comes to the study of the Bible as a "clean slate." Because of the culture in which we live, everyone brings some preconceived notions about the Bible. The Pre-Course Survey allows students to see this diversity from the very beginning and presents an opportunity to talk about the various ways of navigating such marked differences of opinion/belief.

When it comes to what I am attempting to achieve in the classroom, I have found Parker Palmer's thoughts on creating hospitable space to be helpful.[3] It is critical that students feel safe in the environment they and I co-create. To that end, we talk openly about what healthy and safe learning environments are. We both write and speak about the newness of the material we will cover as a class and what students suspect might be the range of reactions. Beginning with the hypothetical makes the discussion comfortable. With one of the primary goals of a liberal arts education being critical thinking, we serve students well by encouraging and teaching self-critical awareness and articulation.

As a means of opening this dialogue, I have developed and utilized a pre-course survey or a pre-course Classroom Assessment Technique (CAT) to identify the presumptions students bring to the course. I use Thomas Angelo's work on prior knowledge as a major foundation of my research and work, as it speaks to the issue many of us face:

> The greatest obstacle to new learning often is not the student's lack of prior knowledge but rather, the existence of prior knowledge. . . . For instance, virtually all incoming first-year college students have knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes about the phenomena they will study in political science, economics, anthropology, sociology, history, and psychology courses.[4]

While Angelo's list was not necessarily meant to be exhaustive, he neglected to mention religion and biblical studies. My paper addresses this gap. Because some people have high emotional-spiritual investment in religious matters, it is obviously a discipline within which it is critical to examine prior knowledge. Students can have a very difficult time transitioning between their learned and accepted (and for some, what they perceive as the only acceptable) way of reading biblical material and the oftentimes new approaches that are presented in this course. [5] Angelo has insightful theories and suggestions that can be used in my field; he has proposed assessment techniques whereby these preconceptions can be brought to light and addressed within the classroom.

Especially for those in their first year or two of college, this introductory course comes as a surprise on a number of fronts. Students from faith communities expect that the class will be a semester-long Torah or Bible Study. Many of them are sadly disillusioned and angry when it is not; others are ecstatically relieved. Simultaneous with these polar emotional and spiritual reactions to the course's content and tone, a handful of the students, particularly those who are now studying the Bible outside their faith tradition, are encountering marked differences of opinions about the Bible for the first time in their lives. They have never had the opportunity to consider biblical texts alongside someone with a different perspective. A few do not want to and maybe cannot think critically about the Bible; oftentimes, it is this group that reacts defensively, with hostility, or by shutting down. Both successive chairpersons of the Religious Studies department and other faculty members have informed me that this has been an ongoing departmental issue for at least the past fifteen years. It is also an interdisciplinary challenge that other colleagues face. This phenomenon is neither particular to The College of Wooster nor to a liberal arts college; for example, in their articles in Teaching Theology and Religion, both Roger Newell and Michael R. Cosby write of students' disappointment and agitation with academic or scholarly analysis of biblical material. [6] Although at The College of Wooster such students are numerically in the minority, their effect on classroom dynamics and the intensity of their reaction can be most profound. It is reflected, for example, in their comments on final course evaluations.[7]

In our present global context, it has become increasingly important that we listen to and talk with people from diverse religious backgrounds; Introduction to Biblical Studies has a potential learning/ teaching outcome of providing a model of how diverse people can talk with and listen to one another without animosity or judgment. This course can present an opportunity for all to learn some new language with which to study Scriptures.

## Strategies

On the first day of class, even before looking at and reviewing the syllabus and course requirements/expectations, I administer the Pre-Course Survey, which can be found at the end of this article. Students are asked to complete the following statement, "The Bible is ...." I then ask, "In this classroom setting, what do you suspect the range of answers to that question will be?" Immediately, they are beckoned and given the space to think beyond themselves and their own traditions and to imagine how others might respond. They become increasingly aware that they are being asked to move out of a devotional faith-based way of studying/reading the Bible.

Students generally take 15-20 minutes to complete the survey. On the second day of class, as part of a larger power-point presentation that introduces the topic "What is the Bible?," I include their responses anonymously. First of all, I have found that this survey is a most effective way to start a dialogue about the different ways people view or define the Bible. Secondly, it readily permits us to see the various influences on us. For example, having completed the survey, students are more easily able to see and understand that rabbis/pastors, youth leaders, Hebrew School/Sunday School teachers, parents, and friends have all played a part in helping them formulate their understandings of the Bible. Many articulate that they have moved away from what they had learned as children. This may have happened when they met a friend/significant other from a different religious tradition. Some directly state that they are challenging their parents'/family viewpoints. Quite a few speak openly about the role that education, reading, TV, and movies have had on challenging and informing their religious understandings.

As we contemplate the various experiences that students may have had and the impact of meeting new ideas, a meaningful comparison can be drawn between their own lives and those of the Ancient Israelites/Hebrews. For example, the students who have found their worldview being challenged by encounters with other cultures may indeed be feeling something similar to the Ancient Israelites/Hebrews, who might have been influenced by a concept from Egypt, Babylon, or, in general, the Ancient Near East. This allows us to speak about religious identity and how that is shaped in relation to those around us. This is true of every person and every religious tradition.

Each section of the class is pluralistic. Each student is able to locate herself/himself within the range; this may be done individually (i.e. privately), with someone they know, or with the class as a whole. This exercise naturally leads to discussions envisioning how people with different sets of presumptions can dialogue. We are able to talk about that person's starting points and presuppositions. This dialogue can pave the way for us to move beyond the individuals in the class to a more global context and a historical one. Not only do they differently complete "The Bible is ...," but the Jewish, Protestant, and Roman Catholic traditions offer different answers to that question.

The canon itself reflects more than one understanding of how the world began. Knowing that not everyone in the class holds the same idea about how the world/cosmos began naturally segues into a discussion about source-criticism and Genesis 1 and 2. Students seem very receptive to there being more than one explanation of creation found within the Bible. Especially, but not only within the first few class sessions, we speak about the various reactions to academic biblical scholarship. We consider the ramifications that proposing early source-critical ideas had on the life of someone like Spinoza, for example. Throughout the course, we look at doctrinal stances of some faith traditions as reflected in faith expressions such as the Nicene, Apostles', and Athanasian Creeds. We also consider the various ways in which Jewish and Christian traditions use biblical events, like the exodus, in liturgies of *Pesach* (Passover) and the Easter Vigil.

Some students enjoy and easily navigate the comparative work. Others struggle. This can also be true of institutions. Sharon Daloz Park writes about the "shipwreck metaphor" as the sincere trauma that a person may undergo when tightly held ideas meet something new and different. [8] She refers to what happens when "a new experience or idea . . . calls into question things as we have perceived them, or as they were taught to us, or as we have read, heard, or assumed. [9] " Presenting Park's work to the class allays some fears and gives names to such reactions so that they can be openly addressed.

With the goal of moving students from the known into the unknown, I introduce the various methods of academic biblical criticism, carefully pointing out how they can be different from a devotional reading of scripture. I have designed lesson plans that address various sets of presumptions or lenses with which people read biblical texts. Some class sessions are devoted, for example, to the students' brainstorming the sort of questions faith communities might ask about or of a text. Two such questions might be: "What can we learn about God's character through this passage?" and "What are the implications of this passage for faithful Jews and faithful Christians?"

After beginning where most students are comfortable, that is, on familiar ground with faith-based questioning, we model several approaches to biblical study — literary and historical criticisms. In this way, we see and experience various ways of reading and defining the texts. Each methodological approach asks its own set of questions of the texts. For example, a question of historical criticism would be "Who wrote this text?" A literary critic, on the other hand, might ask, about the narrator's point-of-view. Language and aim differ from one methodology to the next, each of which has its own set of presuppositions, questions, and starting points. These methodologies thus become the focus of the semester's work, and students are now equipped to see the ways in which these methodologies can be employed to answer their own inquiries and questions. I introduce academic biblical scholarship as a new language that can be shared by all students, regardless of their faith backgrounds or lack thereof.

In the final weeks of the course, I utilize a post-course assessment tool that I have designed to measure the development of students' thinking. In that survey, found at the very end of this paper, many of the questions from the pre-course CAT are revisited. After completing this second assessment measure, students are able to review their own and the collective shifts that have taken place over the semester. I hand back both their pre-course (which I've had since the first day of class) and their post-course CAT's; I give them some time to review their survey responses from a few months ago and encourage them to compare and contrast the set of papers. We speak about the changes. To facilitate this discussion, I prepare either another series of PowerPoint slides or an electronic document that I project on the screen for them to review. This is the overview of the whole class' responses; once again, they and I point out the visible patterns. I have found that students react very well to the two CAT's and that the surveys have greatly assisted us in meeting the course objectives in Introduction to Biblical Studies.

Link to Pre Course Survey

Link to Post Course Survey

**Endnotes:**

1. Thomas Angelo, who has worked in the field of assessment, has coined this phrase. Much of my work has been influenced by his writing and speaking.

2. My experience mirrors that described by Cosby in his article: Michael R. Cosby, "Using the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to Teach Biblical Studies in Christian Liberal Arts Colleges," *Teaching Theology and Religion*, 2001, vol. 4. no. 2, 72.

3. Parker J. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 69-87.

4. Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers* (2d ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 132-133. Italics mine.

5. One student critiqued the textbook in this way: "It helped with the actual material of the course, but not with personal understanding." This person also wanted the course to be "more spiritually taught." Another commented, "The course did nothing to further my faith." The two students who wrote these critiques obviously had and held expectations of the course that differed greatly from my objectives and goals.

6. Cosby, 71-80 and Roger Newell, "Teaching the Bible along the Devotional/ Academic Faultline: An Incarnational Approach to the Quarrel between Love and Knowledge," *Teaching Theology and Religion*, 2003, vol. 6. no. 4, 190-197.

7. A student made the following points on his/her final course evaluation: When asked how I helped students think clearly about the course material, the response was, "She does not present one idea as a truth, but everything as having fallacy of some kind." This same student cited her/his contribution to the class as "a very opposite opinion from an academic perspective." Is there any other discipline in which a college student would feel proud to write on a course evaluation that his/her contribution to a class was "a very opposite opinion from an academic perspective?" It is hard to imagine that comment in the context of a course in economics, biology, or history. One can understand what lies behind it in an introductory biblical studies class.

8. Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 27-31.

9. Ibid., 28.

**Mary Bader**, The College of Wooster, Wooster, Ohio.

## Responses to Bader article (http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=473)

Strategies for Moving Students from Faith-based to Academic Biblical Studies
Mary Bader
December 2005

- As an undergraduate, I would like to comment on Dr. Bader's imaginative and much-desired contribution to pedagogical discussions. Firstly I echo the concerns of Drs. Madden and Dunn in regards to the necessity of "shifting" student positions from "faith-based" to "academic". As I argued in a past contribution to the SBL FORUM ("If you can't take the heat, stay out of the Classroom: Re-evaluating the Student-Teacher Relationship, Classroom Ambiance, and Religion", The SBL FORUM, September 2005 Vol. 3 No. 8,) professors of religion and biblical studies should not seek to "challenge" student views but instead enter into a dialogue where the professor presents material as the "fruits" of academic scholarship, not aimed at "changing" students' beliefs but in inspiring self-reflection and respectful dialogue. Ideally I think, the goal should be that when the student has to answer that essay on redaction and source criticism of Genesis 2, he or she can do so without considering it an affront-to or betrayal-of their faith.

  Another concern of mine (and probably of some of our contributors,) is in regard to definitions. It seems we're all pretty sure what a "faith-based" stance looks line, but what is a "academic" point of view supposed to reflect? Does it mean to not-be "faith-based"? Does it mean to be anti-"faith-based"? This doesn't seem to be the case, since the Society is flooded with a large millieu of scholars who are men and women of faith and yet produce high quality scholarship and insightful discussion on a variety of topics. They are hardly un-"academic".

  I look forward to further dialogue!

  *Daniel J. Gaztambide*
  *Rutgers University*
  *New Brunswick, NJ*

- First, the title seems problematic to me: It could be read as a depreciation of the faith-based study of the Bible. Of course, that is not what Dr. Bader intends. Her comments make it clear that she is writing from her experience of grappling with teaching Biblical Studies to an extreme variety of students (Evangelical Christian, Goth, atheist, secular Jew, and so forth). Nevertheless, I fear that her title implies some sort of deficiency in the attitude of those students who favor a "faith-based" study of the Bible, while her other students, who do not, need not make the theoretical movement from "faith-based" to "academic."

  Second, I am surprised that Dr. Bader has left herself out of the equation. While she described trying to "co-create" an environment for healthy and safe learning, I could not find anything about her discussing with her students how she personally approached the Bible and biblical study. As Dr. Bader writes, "Regardless of background, no one comes to the study of the Bible as a 'clean slate.' Because of the culture in which we live, everyone brings some preconceived notions about the Bible." Hence, Dr. Bader herself is not an unbiased filter of the material. So, I wonder how she addresses that fact, and lays out her own context before her students.

Furthermore, if it is only one group of students in particular that is having its worldview challenged, then I think that needs to be addressed. Dr. Bader mentions the issue of source criticism in relation to the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis. That would certainly challenge her students (e.g., Orthodox Jews, Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians), who hold conservative theologies. But, I could not find a similar example of something which might challenge the worldview of her students who hold liberal or progressive viewpoints about the Bible.

All in all, this is a good article about transferring from a "faith-based" to a secular curriculum in Biblical Studies. Dr. Bader's recommendations about evaluation techniques are most helpful; and, I can see myself integrating them into my own practice.

*Matthew W. I. Dunn*
*University of St. Michael's College*
*Toronto, Ontario*

- It seems that from the outset the desire is to move folks away from one position to another, obstensibly, it seems, in an effort to negate the one position with no intent to allow the postition the students appeared on campus with to be an academically viable position.

  My contribution to this discussion would be who is the person or persons that we teach our students to question. Courses similar to this have served to cause students to question what they were taught at home or at synagogue/church and to apply critical methodologies to that questioning but not too often have I heard or read of folks being taught to also question to position and conclusion of the professor. I would suspect that in the student's mind the professor turns into an authority figure as powerful as any rabbi or pastor and often times more so to the point that one is taught by that professor to question the rabbi or pastor but not the professor. Is the presentation made in such a way that credence may be given to what was taught at home or at the synagogue or church contra to the position of the academic? Is one of the possible conclusions from such a course that the Bible is indeed what it claims to be or what a rabbi or pastor claims it to be? If yes then I would say that you have a balanced teaching environment but if the answer is no, the home, the synagogue or the church is wrong and is their position is not one of the possible positions from and academic perspective then the course seems to exist merely to denigrate what many of the students bring with them and not to present a balance that recognizes that the professor and some academic views bay be wrong that the synagogue/church/home may be right.

I have often seen from many academics that only the position that reduces the Bible to a cultural artifact with no more value than fixing someone within their provincial limitations is legitimate, not recognizing that there is a whole group and school of highly qualified and published academics who recognize the Bible for what it purports to be, i.e. the Word of the God who created us and that what it contains has been shown to be able to stand up to academic, historic, and scientific scrutiny.

I have encountered folks who declared my position (yes, I am conservative in my hermeneutic) as narrow or closed minded. After one such conversation, and after naming the liberal scholars that I had read as part of my academic program at a conservative school, my friend, an MDiv graduate of Princeton, could not name one conservative that he had read. He had to admit that objectively his was the more narrow and closed minded education.

So too in this discussion. Is the position that the Bible is a trustworthy reflection of the one, true God presented as academically acceptable or is it set up only to be knocked down? Are the weaknesses of the more critical positions questioned or only the weaknesses of the classical-traditional position?

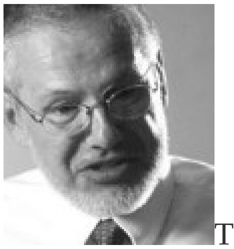
*Shawn C. Madden, Ph.D., Major, USMC (retired)*
*Associate Professor of Hebrew & Old Testament*
*Director of The Library*
*Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary*
*Wake Forest, NC*

- Great article from Mary Bader,
  I look forward to using this in my teaching.

  *Ron Clark, DMin*
  *Cascade College*

## Critical Methods and Guarded Minds

**Frank Ritchel Ames (http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=219)**



The phrase *biblical criticism* evokes resistance among students accustomed to hearing more reverent combinations such as *Holy* and *Bible*, or *Sacred* and *Scripture* . Form criticism, literary criticism, feminist criticism, and other approaches valued by scholars unnerve some readers, especially when these methods are brought to bear on texts that are embraced as sacred and read in devotion. From the perspective of more than a few confessing students, sacred things are not subject to criticism, even in the most noble and innocent sense of the term. Ironically, the high regard that some students have for the Bible not only draws them to it but erects a barrier that keeps them from it.

Therein lies a dilemma for the professor who teaches biblical studies. How does one introduce critical methods to earnest yet hesitant learners? How can one teach above suspicion and around reticence? The problem is relevant to instruction from classrooms in small church-related colleges to lecture halls at large public universities, for class rosters almost always include students who have guarded minds shaped by more conserving faith communities. I use the term *guarded* and not *closed*, for there is nothing wrong (and something right) about reading with suspicion, a stance that is widely appreciated in contemporary biblical studies. I also prefer the term *guarded* because I have come to think of reticent students as gifts: they are often invested in the subject and highly motivated, and they possess something that those who teach courses in biblical literature hope to sharpen and to soften: namely, a critical edge. A guarded mind is rarely a closed mind, and confessing students are not suspicious of critical methods *per se*; rather, they are leery of their application to canonical texts in their own religious traditions. To overcome resistance, therefore, the teacher may introduce critical methods by applying them to neutral texts or in an analogous field. Learning may then be transferred.

### Transfer Learning

The concept of transfer is familiar to those who teach in primary and secondary schools and is closely allied with discovery learning, an approach advocated by Jerome Bruner.[1] Students are provided with material and questions to explore. They are not asked to memorize facts or to master content; rather, they are expected to discover abstract principles and to acquire skills that can be used to solve analogous problems. Transferable skills, of course, are high-order skills. In Bloom's taxonomy, rote memorization is not complex; the level of complexity increases as one progresses from memorization to its comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.[2] Memorizing a poem, though difficult and time-consuming, is relatively simple; however, it is not so simple to explain what a poem means, how it achieves meaning, and why it is or is not worth reading. Transferable skills that involve interpretation, explanation, and evaluation are complex, and it is the abstract nature of complex skills that makes them transferable. The physician may not know what the veterinarian knows about the anatomy of animals, yet he or she is able to think abstractly about problems and solutions related to human anatomy and, for that matter, the anatomy of many species. Learning transfers, but only when certain conditions are met. Transfer requires active, explicit, and practiced abstraction and reflection. It occurs when the student recognizes that two fields are analogous, understands an abstract principle in one field, and explores its application in another. [3]

### Analogous Disciplines

Biblical interpretation and art criticism are analogous disciplines. Narrative is a form of art, and, conversely, art a form of narrative. Texts and paintings alike tell stories and can be "read." The abstract reading skills learned in art criticism readily transfer to biblical criticism. Adele Berlin makes this point in *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*: "Because all art-forms share some of the same problems of expression and perception, what we learn of one can often be applied to another. This, however, is not to be applied directly, but rather as an analogy; for each art-form involves its own means of perception." [4]

To introduce reticent students to critical reading strategies related to the design, provenance, and ideology of a text, I turn to the less threatening space of an analogous discipline: art criticism. I display a painting and ask three basic questions: What elements can be observed in the work, and how are they arranged? What might the elements have symbolized in the social world of the artist? and What ideas or ideals might account for the elements in the painting? I work one example in class. I then ask the students to view a second painting, to explore the questions, and to present their interpretations for discussion. I allow ample time for students to do research in the library and to reflect on their discoveries about the painting, themselves, and the questions, and during the discussion I often voice the words *criticism* and *critical*. Resistant students seemed to be changed by the exercise, which creates a safe space for experimentation. They enjoy the lively discussion and almost always one will ask, "Can we apply these questions to passages in the Bible?" Because the students have enrolled in a biblical studies course, not in art appreciation, they ponder the relatedness of art and biblical criticism throughout the exercise, and this fosters conditions essential to transfer learning.

The analogous relationship of biblical criticism and art criticism provides an opportunity for those who teach critical methods to counter resistance. By temporarily shifting from one field to the other, confessing students who hesitate to experiment with critical reading strategies are allowed to experiment unencumbered by certain pious fears. As they see the value of a critical approach, they become more comfortable and gain confidence in applying critical methods to canonical texts. They are set free to explore the texts they treasure in new ways.

**"Reading" Hogarth**

One of the paintings that I have used to introduce critical methods is *The Graham Children* by William Hogarth, an eighteenth-century British engraver. Hogarth sought to transform canvas into theater and once explained, "I have endeavoured to treat my subjects as a dramatic writer: my picture is my stage, and men and women my players." [5] Painted in 1742, *The Graham Children* was commissioned by Daniel Graham, father of the four children in the portrait and an apothecary to the Chelsea Hospital, an appointment that made it possible for him to acquire the lavish mansion in which his children posed. The names of the children, from oldest to youngest, are Henrietta Catherine (b. 1733), Richard Robert (b. 1734), Anna Maria (b. 1738), and Thomas (b. 1740). [6] The portrait, according to David Bindman, is "one of the definitive accounts of eighteenth-century childhood." [7]
[The Graham Children may be seen at The London Gallery in London. For a digital image and notes for teachers, visit http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/education/teachers_notes/hogarth.htm]

What elements are included in the painting, and how are they arranged? The four children are most prominent: two girls stand in the center; two boys are seated at their sides. The children are smiling and are attired in fine clothing. The baby wears a bonnet and gown, as was customary for babies of the period. Fresh flowers and fruit adorn the hair of the young women; flowers are printed on the younger girl's dress, which she holds out in display, and the older girl holds double cherries; more fruit and flowers are held by the basket near the stroller. The baby is reaching for the cherries in his sister's hand, or perhaps he reaches for the goldfinch in the cage, which also draws the gaze of his older brother. The caged goldfinch is one of three birds that appear in the painting: a second is carved on the handle of the baby's stroller, with its sharp wings pointed upward and backward in motionless flight, and a third, if not visible, is heard in the warble of the *serinette*, the bird-whistle music box held on the older boy's lap. Painted on the music box is Orpheus charming the beasts. Lurking in the background above the lad is a cat with eyes fixed on the bird in the cage. On the wall behind the cage hangs a painting with dark clouds rolling toward the coast. On the table above Baby Thomas sits a clock decorated with a Cupid-like statue holding a scythe.

Four happy children, three skittish birds, and a common but menacing house cat; double cherries, fresh fruit, and cut flowers; a painted storm, a clock with an infant holding a scythe, and Orpheus charming the beasts: what might these elements symbolize in the social world of the artist? Orpheus, in Greek lore, played his lyre so beautifully that even animals and rocks were moved to dance. In the Hogarth painting, the lad is doing the same: he plays music; the bird sings; his sister dances. But the tale of Orpheus is a tragic one: Orpheus lost his wife to the bite of a venomous snake, and though his music proved powerful enough to move Hades to release his love from the abode of the dead, he lost her again, and his music could not raise the dead. On the clock above Baby Thomas poses an infant grim reaper. Behind the happy children, a storm is brewing, and the cat is waiting to pounce. Fresh fruit and flowers, like all living things, will perish quickly, and birds will fly away. The eldest daughter holds the arm of the baby and double cherries, and gazes out of Edenic childhood and from the canvas to the observer, who stands outside the portrait but by looking in may share her understanding of the world. [8]

What notions about the world might account for the elements in the painting? I leave this for students to discover but mention two dates that have proved significant in my class discussions and critical readings: Hogarth painted *The Graham Children* in 1742; Baby Thomas died in 1741. After reading Hogarth, the class reads Moses, and guarded minds ask new questions about design, provenance, and ideology, and discover that the words *biblical* and *criticism* are not an irreverent combination.

Frank Ritchel Ames, Director of Programs and Initiatives for the Society of Biblical Literature, has been teaching undergraduates for two decades.

**Notes**

[1] Jerome Bruner, "The Act of Discovery," *Harvard Educational Review* 31 (1961): 21-32.
[2] B. S. Bloom, et al., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1956).
[3] D. N. Perkins and G. Salomon, "Transfer of Learning," in *The International Encyclopedia of Education* (2nd ed.; 12 vols.; ed. Torsten Husen and T. Neville Postlethwaite; New York: Pergamon, 1994), 11: 6453-5; Richard E. Mayer, *Thinking, Problem Solving, Cognition* (2nd ed.; New York: W. H. Freeman, 1992), 453.
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[7] David Bindman, *Hogarth* (World of Art; New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1981), 143.
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## Teaching Biblical Studies: Fact and Faith

**Mitchell G. Reddish (http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=40)**

I have been teaching biblical studies for eighteen years at Stetson University, a small comprehensive university in Florida with an emphasis on undergraduate studies. Although today the university has no official ties to any religious body, throughout most of its history Stetson was a Baptist-affiliated institution. Approximately ten years ago the university severed all formal denominational ties. This severing of official connections to a religious body did not mean that the university was divorcing itself from all commitment to religion and values. Rather, the university now describes itself as a private university that from its founding "has affirmed the importance of spiritual life and the quest for truth." The university has recently revised its mission statement, explicitly stating that the university "encourages all of its members . . . to develop an appreciation for the spiritual dimension of life." The mission statement also affirms "the role of religious and spiritual quests for meaning in human experience."

Because of its religious heritage and the newly adopted mission statement, all students at Stetson are required to take one course in religious studies. Until approximately five years ago, all students were required to take Introduction to Biblical Literature to meet this requirement. Now, students may choose from among five introductory courses that satisfy this requirement: Introduction to Biblical Literature, Introduction to Religion, Introduction to Judaism, Introduction to Christianity, and Introduction to World Religions. Approximately half of my teaching load each year involves teaching one of these required courses, the Introduction to Biblical Literature course. In addition to teaching this introductory course, I also teach upper division, elective courses in biblical studies. Thus I teach students who take courses in biblical studies because they are fulfilling a requirement, as well as students who enroll in the classes because they have an interest in studying biblical texts.

As is the case in many areas of the United States, and particularly in the southeast, the majority of students at Stetson have been culturally immersed in Christian ideas and values, whether they are active participants in that religious tradition or not. Many of them are eager to learn more about the book that has been an important part of their faith development and that has shaped their understanding of themselves and their worldview. Others are mildly curious to gain insight into a book that they have heard about but have never read, or at least never understood. A few, however, enter the classroom having had just enough of religion to know that they do not want any more. They dislike being required to take a course in religious studies because they do not see its relevance to their college and career goals. Nor do they have any personal interest in religion. In their view, having to take a course in religious studies is a waste of their time and an infringement on their "right" to choose their own course of study. One of the challenges, then, at a school like Stetson that requires a course in religious studies is to help students in this last category move beyond their resistance to being in the course. If I am going to succeed with these students, I must help them discover that these ancient texts still have relevance for them. For some students, their interest is piqued when they begin to see the ways biblical images and concepts have shaped our culture. For other students, the texts become meaningful once they recognize that the biblical writings struggle with some of the same questions and issues with which they are struggling. I know that I have succeeded when a student writes in her course evaluation at the end of the semester, "I was opposed to students being required to take a religion course. Now I believe everyone should have to take this course. I have learned so much I never knew."

Another challenge of teaching, one that is probably unique to religious studies, and particularly to biblical studies, is that students often are not shy about refuting what we say. Some of them feel they are already experts on the Bible. Who are we to contradict what they already believe about the Bible? They come into our classes convinced that what they have been taught by parents and religious leaders is the final word in religious studies. Students who would not dare confront or challenge their professors in the political science or sociology department, for example, have no such hesitancy about questioning the validity of what we present in our courses. Some students consider they have not only the right but the religious obligation to correct the "errors" in our teaching. In most cases, such students are sincere in their attempts to correct what we teach. They are so passionate about the Bible because religion matters to them. The challenge I have as a professor is to find a way to let them maintain that passion, yet get them to be open to the possibility that what they have previously been taught might need to be corrected or least rethought.

Compounding the problem is that students sometimes enter our courses already prejudiced against our discipline and even us as instructors. They have been warned about those godless, liberal professors who are intent on destroying the faith of unsuspecting or spiritually weak students. Recently when I was teaching an interdisciplinary Honors Program course that was not a religious studies course, I paired the students for dialogue. I asked them to share information about themselves and then to respond to what they had learned about their dialogue partner. When reporting to the class about the exercise, one student stated that she had learned that her dialogue partner was a devout Roman Catholic and also a major in religious studies. She said she was surprised that a student of deep faith would choose to major in religious studies because she had heard that the religious studies faculty were all anti-Christian. (The irony in her statement is that four of the five full-time faculty in our department are ordained ministers, one of whom serves as a reserve chaplain in the Air Force.)

Unfortunately for some students, their experience in our classes may not dissuade them from their negative opinions about religious studies. Their first exposure to a critical reading or questioning of biblical texts is often an uncomfortable and troubling experience. I spend the first part of each introductory course in biblical studies talking with students about different ways in which the Bible can be studied. I explain to them the differences between a devotional/religious reading of the texts and a critical/scholarly reading of the texts. After talking about the importance of each approach and the setting in which each approach is appropriate, the students and I agree that the approach that we will follow in the classroom is a critical reading of the texts. I emphasize that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. A critical reading of the text can bring new insight and meaning to the biblical material for a person of faith. Furthermore, I point out that because our approach is a scholarly approach does not mean that the devotional approach to the Bible is not important. After all, the Bible has had such a profound influence on the world not because it has provided answers to scholarly probings, but because it has suggested answers to the larger questions of human existence.

In introducing my courses, I always struggle with the issue of self-disclosure. How much do I tell the students about my own faith stance toward the material we are studying? Do I admit to the students that I, too, am a person of faith, one whose credo and worldview continue to be shaped by these documents that we are studying? Or do I refrain from disclosing my own stance toward the texts with the hope that this will make students who have no faith commitment to the Bible more at ease in the course? After teaching the introductory biblical studies course three or four times every year for the past eighteen years, I am still not sure which is the best approach. I have tried it both ways. I lean more toward disclosing my own commitments, primarily for three reasons. First, I want students of faith to be as comfortable in the course as are students who see the texts only as ancient writings with little or no contemporary relevance. As mentioned above, some students are deeply suspicious about the academic study of the Bible. If a brief statement of my faith claims can make them more comfortable, then perhaps they will be better able to hear what takes place in the classroom.

Second, I want students to see that one can approach the texts critically while still reading them from the perspective of faith. Allowing these two approaches to exist in creative tension with each other is a difficult idea for students to grasp, however. A few years back, after a Monday morning class, a student came up to me and said, "I saw you at church yesterday. I donapos;t understand how you can go to church and still teach what you do in this course." The struggle that this student was experiencing is the type of struggle that I would want other students also to experience. I want them to know that one need not dismiss critical scholarship in order to accept the faith claims of the Bible. Conversely, one does not have to lay aside a faith commitment to the Bible in order to approach it critically.

Some instructors may argue that our task as teachers is to present the material and not be concerned about how our reading of the text impacts the personal religious beliefs of the students in our classes. Our concern is not with what students do with the information, but with students learning the correct information. Our role is not to be pastoral counselors or spiritual advisers. Such a view not only is based on an extremely narrow understanding of our task as professors, but also is poor pedagogy. If what students hear from us is so detrimental to their worldview that they are no longer able to hear what we say, then we have failed as teachers. Without abdicating our responsibility to challenge students, to confront them with new ideas and new ways of thinking, and to dissuade them from erroneous or naive views, we can still be sensitive to how we expose students to new ideas and how our teaching is being received.

The third reason I often tip my hand about my religious convictions is that I want students to realize the stance from which I read the texts. In spite of how "objective" I attempt to be, my own commitments and biases flavor how I read the texts. I sometimes discuss with students about how my own identity affects my reading of biblical literature. I am a white, middle-class male who was raised in the South. Regardless of how hard I try, I can never hear the texts the same way my female colleagues or colleagues of color hear the texts. In the same way, my own religious convictions affect my reading of biblical literature. I may work diligently not to let my own religious views intrude into the classroom, but I am never completely successful at that. My self-disclosure is a way of trying to be an honest reader of the texts with my students.

A common experience for students who have a faith commitment to biblical texts is their failure to recognize the distinction between truth and historicity. When we tell students that an event in the Bible may not be historically accurate, they hear us saying that the Bible is not true. I try to help students understand that historical truth is only one type of truth. A story may be full of historical inaccuracies or even be completely non-historical, yet still contain deep theological or religious truth. Whether the events and stories in the Bible are historically true or not, they still present the truth claims of Judaism and Christianity. Those of us who teach religious studies are accustomed to thinking about various types or expressions of truth. Our students usually are not. For many of them, the only option is that a story is "true" or it is "false." Thus, when I help them see the differences in the two Genesis accounts of creation and suggest that neither is historically or scientifically accurate, they hear me saying that these stories are not "true." My task is to help them understand that the stories may be true on a deeper level. They represent ancient Israel's attempt to say something profound about its understanding of its God, of humanity, and of the entire created world.

In the language of Paul Ricoeur, our task is help students move from naivete to critical thinking and then ultimately to a second, or post-critical, naivete. In the last stage, students can move beyond the simplistic true/false dichotomy to appreciating the truth that these stories are intended to convey, apart from the question of historicity. Even for students who have no personal faith commitment to the biblical texts, arriving at the stage of post-critical naivete is important. Only then can they enter the world of the text and appreciate what the texts are communicating. To have the ability to understand these ancient stories as stories and appreciate what they are saying is the goal of reading religious texts. Otherwise, we end up viewing the texts only as literary documents or historical works. My task as a religious studies professor is to help my students learn to hear and appreciate the religious dimension of these texts. (This is not unique to the study of the Bible. I would make the same argument if I were teaching sacred texts from other religious traditions.) I want students to enter the stories - whether they be history, myths, parables, or folk tales - and appreciate the religious truths these texts present. Whether a student personally affirms the message of the texts is not my concern. My job is not to defend nor repudiate the truth of the texts but to help students hear the texts.

In spite of all I do, some students will continue to resist what happens in the classroom. The move from a naive reading to a critical reading of the text is too painful and too frightening. What I view as exposing students to a critical reading of the text, the students view as destroying their faith. This has been a consistent experience of mine throughout my teaching career. The first year I taught at Stetson I received a Christmas card from a student in one of my introductory courses. Inside was a three-page letter in which the student expressed disappointment and sorrow over the subject matter of the course. She wanted me to know that she would be praying for my salvation, because I obviously was not a Christian. Similarly, this past semester when a student turned in her final exam in the introductory course, she handed me along with the exam a three-page letter detailing her disappointment and anger over the course. In the letter she wrote, "While taking your class, I was extremely disturbed by the principals [*sic*] you taught and the words you spoke. Rather than the class focusing on Christian topics and teaching biblical literature, as the course name suggests, it focuses on the 'problems' of the Bible. As I sat in class and took notes, I thought that a more proper name for the course would be Mocking the Bible 101." The remainder of her letter was a refutation of my approach in the classroom, complete with citations from Josh McDowell's *New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* in order to show that my scholarship was faulty and biased. Since the semester had ended, all I could do was send her a note expressing both my gratitude that she had taken the time to write and my hope that the umbrella of the Christian faith was large enough to include us both.

I know my experience is not unique. Most of us who teach biblical studies have had similar experiences. For students like these, all we can do is expose them to the critical approach and hope that some of what we say and demonstrate to them will eventually germinate and take root. It would be tempting to dismiss such students as lost causes about whom we should not be overly concerned. I am not comfortable with that approach, however. Because I teach at a school that says the religious and spiritual quests for meaning in life are important, I think I have an obligation to let students know that I take their spiritual commitments seriously. I need to keep working at finding ways to help students as they struggle with the internal conflicts that a critical study of the Bible creates for them.

One of the advantages of teaching biblical studies at a place like Stetson is that I have a large amount of freedom in my teaching that professors in church-related institutions or in state universities may not experience. In some church-related institutions, particularly those strongly tied to their sponsoring church body, faculty may feel constrained to teach within the parameters of "orthodox" interpretations. In my setting, I have the academic freedom to teach and explore any topic or any view I choose, limited only by my own integrity and professional judgment. On the other hand, since my institution is a private university, I feel free to discuss issues of faith or religious commitment in the classroom without worrying that I may be violating any separation of church and state principles. In the introductory classes, which fulfill a university requirement, I am more reluctant to pursue any involved discussions of faith issues because there is still an element of "mandatory" participation in the course. Because I do not want to be seen as imposing my beliefs on unwilling students, I limit discussion of faith issues in the introductory courses. When asked directly about matters of faith, I respond honestly and briefly and encourage students to continue the conversation with me outside class if they are interested. In elective courses I feel more comfortable engaging students in conversations about the religious and spiritual dimensions of the texts and about what the texts might mean for people who see them as bearers of truth.

Most of us who teach entered this profession because we are excited about what we teach and we want to share that enthusiasm with our students. The reward in teaching comes when we can see the light click on in our students as they have one of those "aha!" moments of self-discovery, or when they fall in love with exploring new ideas and gaining new insights. One of those rewarding moments for me occurred when a student came up to me at the end of the semester in which she was taking the Introduction to Biblical Literature course. Thanking me for the course, she said, "I've never really known much about the Bible. Now after this course I want to study it even more and find out more about my Jewish faith."

I teach because I enjoy teaching. I teach biblical studies because I think these texts are powerful, insightful texts that continue to confront, challenge, and inspire. These texts excite me. If I do my job well, then my students will sense that excitement and perhaps catch some of that excitement for themselves. For students who have no faith commitment to the Bible, I hope they will be intrigued by this literature and appreciative of its influence in the past and in the present. For those students who view the biblical texts as bearers of divine truth, then I hope their experiences in my classroom will challenge, strengthen, and in some cases disturb their beliefs. Their experience may not always equal that of the student who, in an unsolicited note at the end of his final exam, wrote, "I have sincerely enjoyed your class. I have been an active Christian my entire life and in the span of one semester you taught me more than I had learned in 19 years." Even so, I will view my teaching a success if I can help my students appreciate these texts as living texts that speak out of the depths of human experience, that wrestle with the some of the most important issues of human existence, and that invite reflection on the divine-human encounter.

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