

# INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS

Writing an introductory textbook on the Hebrew Bible at a time when virtually every “assured result” of biblical scholarship is open for debate is a daunting enterprise. How can anyone hope to summarize the current status of the field in language that is comprehensible to the typical undergraduate student? The task seems hopeless. But perhaps this is the wrong question. Perhaps we should be asking instead, “Is this the only way to introduce students to the Hebrew Bible?”

This book was born out of a profound sense of frustration with the pedagogical approaches that dominate virtually every published introduction to the Hebrew Bible. The problem lies not with the quality of the scholarship, but with the manner in which it is presented. The nature of the problem can be seen by looking at two issues: the target audience of the textbooks and their institutional location.

*Target audience.* Most of the introductory textbooks currently on the market were written for students who have a general familiarity with the content and stories of the Bible and are eager (or at least willing) to learn more about the fascinating world of biblical scholarship. The primary goal of these textbooks is to lead students into a more critical understanding of the biblical text. This view of the pedagogical task shapes not only what is included in the book but also how it is presented. Much of the discussion revolves around the central critical questions that have engaged scholars since the rise of biblical criticism, such as the origins of the various books that make up the Hebrew Bible, the history of ancient Israel (including the historicity of the biblical narratives), the ideological orientations of the various biblical authors and editors, and the value of archaeology for understanding the biblical text. Some authors make an effort to engage students in careful literary readings of particular biblical texts, but the goal is the same: to lead students into a more nuanced, critical understanding of the Hebrew Bible.

So what is wrong with this approach? Nothing, as long as it is used with the proper audience. The tradi-

tional model has worked well for generations of students in both seminaries and undergraduate institutions. But times have changed, and fewer and fewer students are entering American colleges and universities with the amount of biblical literacy that these textbooks presuppose. In many parts of the country, the majority of students who sign up for an introductory course on the Hebrew Bible have only vague (and often incorrect) ideas about its content. Most are taking the course to satisfy a general education requirement, not to pursue a major in religious studies or theology. The needs and interests of these students are clearly different than those of their parents’ generation. Yet instructors continue to use the same kinds of textbooks and methods to teach them about the Hebrew Bible. Is it any wonder that many of them find our courses to be boring, excessively difficult, or both?

*Institutional location.* The traditional approach to teaching the Hebrew Bible presumes that there is no need to justify the place of the subject in the curriculum. In other words, it assumes an institutional location that is sympathetic to the critical study of the Bible. This paradigm is still prevalent in seminaries and church-related colleges, but not in state universities and secular colleges. Faculty members in these institutions have increasingly been asked to defend the importance and validity of teaching courses in biblical studies. The traditional response has been to point out that these courses use critical methodologies and are fundamentally historical in orientation; that is, they do not concern themselves with questions about the relevance of these texts for contemporary believers. But the rhetorical weight of these arguments has been undermined in recent years by the rise of postmodern criticism that challenges the presumed objectivity of historical study while simultaneously calling attention to the inherently subjective nature of the educational process (and of religion in general). If courses in biblical studies are to survive the challenge of postmodernism, they must be justified along other lines.

One way to ensure a place for biblical studies in the curriculum is to employ the same methods for introducing students to the Bible that are used when studying other religions. In this approach, the Hebrew Bible would be treated not simply as a literary artifact of a particular religious community but also as a sample text (or better, a set of texts) through which students would learn the language and methods commonly used in the academic study of religion. When studying the narrative texts in the Hebrew Bible, for instance, students would learn to ask what kinds of religious purposes a story might have fulfilled in the lives of the people who created and/or preserved it. When looking at cultic texts, they would learn to talk about the symbolic and performative aspects of the various rituals and explore how the rituals in the Hebrew Bible compare with similar rituals in other cultures. When reading wisdom texts, they would learn about how wisdom traditions function in traditional societies, both among village cultures and among literate elites.

Framed in this way, the “Introduction to the Hebrew Bible” course could serve some of the same pedagogical functions as a more general “Introduction to Religion” course. The value of such a course would be clearer to scholars who are unfamiliar with the world of contemporary biblical studies, while the use of a common language could open up new channels for dialogue with colleagues in other fields. Such a cross-cultural approach might also prove more popular with students, since it coincides with the growing interest in other cultures on many college campuses. Students who enroll in a course of this type would learn less about professional biblical scholarship than those in traditional Hebrew Bible courses, but they would learn more about the breadth of human religious experience. Students who enjoyed such a course might be as likely to continue their studies with a course on Buddhism or Islam as with an upper-level course on the Hebrew Bible.

## CHARTING A NEW COURSE

This book seeks to chart a new course for introducing students to the Hebrew Bible. What makes this book different is not the manner in which the biblical materials

are interpreted but the way in which they are presented. Where others use the history of ancient Israel or the canonical books of the Bible as their organizing principle, this book is structured around an analytical framework derived from the comparative study of religion. (For an overview of the book’s contents, see the “Introduction for Students.”) This framework is most evident in the early chapters of the book, where the role of Scriptures in religious communities is discussed, and at the beginnings of each of the major sections, where comparative perspectives are used to shed light on a particular category of belief or practice. Much of the time, however, the comparative framework operates in the background, emerging from the shadows only when it promises to add substantially to the discussion.

The choice of a comparative approach reflects the intended audience of the book: freshmen and sophomores who are taking an introductory course on the Hebrew Bible either to fulfill a general education requirement or as an elective outside of their major. Students who are pursuing a major in religion/theology or who wish to take advanced courses in the Bible will find that the book provides an adequate foundation for further studies in the field, but no such intent is presumed. Because the book assumes no prior experience with the Hebrew Bible or the academic study of religion, it begins at a more basic level than most other introductory texts. Things that are taken for granted in other textbooks (familiarity with concepts, stories, characters, and so forth) are explained as though students are encountering them for the first time. Every effort has been made to ensure that the language of the book is accessible to the average student—the prose is simple, clear, and direct, and unnecessary technical terms and footnotes have been omitted. Some instructors may think that the book aims too low in its attempt to make the material available to students. But classroom testing has shown that students are able to learn more from a book like this than from those that target a higher level of biblical knowledge or reading ability.

Crafting a textbook that would introduce students not only to the Hebrew Bible but also to the academic study of religion has required many hard choices concerning the material to be included. Students can only learn a certain amount of material in a semester, so the addition

of materials from the comparative study of religion has meant omitting certain issues normally covered in introductory textbooks and treating others more briefly than is customary. Yet a sympathetic reading of the entire book will show that in this case less truly is more. Too often the authors of introductory textbooks have failed to ask the most basic questions about what undergraduate students in a general education curriculum really need to know about the Hebrew Bible. Most books include far more information than students can possibly absorb in a semester, and many are so packed with details (especially about the history of ancient Israel) that students are apt to lose the forest in the trees. While a certain amount of detail is necessary to understand any subject, this book seeks to ensure that students grasp the big picture of contemporary biblical scholarship, even if it means sacrificing some of the details.

## CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

For the most part, this book presents mainstream scholarly views on the Hebrew Bible and comparative religion. No scholar will agree with every position that is taken here on the various points that are currently up for debate in both fields, but those who disagree should be able to recognize that the positions taken here are not idiosyncratic.

*Hebrew Bible.* With regard to the ongoing controversy over the historicity of the narrative books of the Hebrew Bible, this book follows a descriptive approach, laying out three broad schools of interpretation without endorsing any of them. The strength of this approach is that it allows instructors with widely differing views to use the book without feeling that their students are being misled. But it also means that students receive no clear answer to the question of whether it is possible to construct a well-rounded and consistent portrait of pre-exilic Israel from the narrative materials of the Hebrew Bible. Providing answers to that question is left to the instructor. This lack of a unifying historical center means that the depiction of Israel's past is more fragmentary and less coherent than in most other Hebrew Bible textbooks. But historical reconstruction is less central to this book

than to other introductory texts, so the absence of a clear stance on historical questions will have less impact on the learning experience than if the book were heavily historical in orientation.

A similar reticence will be observed concerning the Documentary Hypothesis and other source theories. Instructors who are accustomed to textbooks that devote considerable space to source theories (including tradition, form, source, and redaction criticisms) will be disappointed by the small amount of attention that these methods receive in the present volume. The decision to downplay source theories reflects an authorial judgment that the details of such theories are less important than other topics in a course geared toward general education students. Similar decisions have shaped the treatment of other issues throughout the book.

*Comparative religion.* Much of the comparative language employed in this book reflects a functionalist view of religion. Functionalism is employed here as a heuristic tool to describe how religion works. Its use should not be taken as an endorsement of the reductionism that too often accompanies functionalist interpretations of religion. In a similar way, the use of comparative materials and categories does not imply any judgment about the essential nature of religion or the degree of similarity or difference among various religions. The primary reason for including comparative materials is to demystify some of the beliefs and practices depicted in the Hebrew Bible, not to argue for any particular view of religion as a human phenomenon. A thoroughly comparative analysis would require more attention to holistic systems and more emphasis on differences than will be found in the present volume.

Those who have studied other religions will undoubtedly think of many other places where comparative perspectives might have been used to illuminate the biblical materials. In fact, the amount of comparative material included in the book is dwarfed by the space that is given to the standard questions of biblical scholarship. In addition, most of the comparative material that is included is rather general in nature, with only scattered references to specific religions. All of this is by design. Comparative insights are clearly useful when introducing students to the Hebrew Bible, but the inclusion of

too many specific examples from other religions could distract students from their primary task of understanding the Hebrew Bible as a literary artifact produced by a particular ancient religious community. Instructors who would prefer to see more specific examples from other religions can always supplement the text with additional comparative materials.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is designed to provide students with material that they can read and understand on their own so that the instructor does not have to spend every class session explaining or restating the textbook. This in turn can free the instructor to do more creative and interesting things in the classroom. Many will choose to spend their class time guiding students through focused analyses of particular biblical texts. Others might set up debates between teams of students or commission students to do artistic renditions of biblical stories. Still others might prefer to engage students in discussions of the theological and ethical questions raised by the texts. The key point is that a clear, readable textbook will make it easier for students to grasp essential concepts so that class time can be used to supplement rather than to rehash the content of the textbook.

No textbook, however, can replace a firsthand encounter with the biblical text. Most instructors recognize this and therefore assign readings from the Hebrew Bible to accompany the relevant chapters of whatever textbook they happen to be using. Such an approach assumes that students will recognize the links between the textbook and the biblical materials and integrate the two sets of readings into a coherent whole. In the eyes of students, however, the Bible and the textbook often seem like parallel and unrelated sets of readings, and their natural reaction is to focus on the textbook as in other classes. Unless they are required to write about the biblical readings, many (or even most) students will treat them as optional. Bright students who listen well and take good notes can sometimes go through an entire course on the Hebrew Bible without opening their Bibles.

To counter this problem, this textbook includes reading assignments and written exercises at key points in

every chapter. At the end of most of the major subsections, students are given a list of verses from the Hebrew Bible to read and a set of questions based on the readings. These exercises link the biblical readings to specific points in the textbook, creating a circular pattern of learning; the textbook prepares students to understand the biblical texts in the exercises, and the biblical texts reinforce what students have been reading in the textbook. But this only works if students do the exercises. It is therefore important that students be encouraged to read at least some of the biblical passages in each exercise (or others supplied by the instructor), even when they are not being asked to complete the assignment for a grade. This is especially true for the first fifteen chapters of the book, which do not focus on a particular book or set of texts from the Hebrew Bible. The exercises in these chapters are designed to give students a chance to apply what they are learning to specific biblical texts. A simple but effective way to motivate students to read the biblical passages is to divide the class into groups and require each group to write on one of the exercises and share their answers with the class. Another approach is to tell them that some of the questions from the exercises will appear on a quiz or exam. Reviewing some of the exercises in class, whether done by the instructor or by the students in small groups, can also help to underline the importance of the biblical readings.

Finally, a few comments are in order about the way in which the book is organized. The book was designed for a class that meets three times a week, with students normally reading a chapter for each class session. In most institutions, this will leave a few extra sessions that can be used either to focus more intensively on a few of the chapters (for example, looking more closely at some of the prophetic books) or to address issues that the instructor feels were not adequately treated in the book. For a course that meets only twice a week, some of the chapters could be doubled up or divided so that students will read one and a half to two chapters for each class session. The Web page for the textbook contains sample syllabi showing how the readings can be allocated over different time frames.

Some instructors might be concerned about the apparent fact that students do not begin looking at specific

biblical texts until chapter 15. But this is a misconception, as the exercises will have students reading and interacting with biblical texts from chapter 3 onward. Reading shorter texts with a particular question in mind is a more effective strategy for training students with no biblical background to make sense of the Bible than requiring them to read longer texts with little or no guidance. The readings in the exercises can then be used as the focal point of class discussion if the instructor so chooses.

The primary reason for postponing direct engagement with the biblical text until later in the book is to allow time for students to develop an academic mindset before sending them off to analyze texts on their own. For some, the world of the Bible is so foreign that they automatically import modern modes of thinking to help them make sense of the texts. Others come to the text with particular theological perspectives and agendas that shape their understanding of what they are reading. While it is certainly possible to address these issues inductively by reading the texts together in the classroom, it can be difficult to teach both content and critical methodology at the same time. The first fifteen chapters of this book are designed to address issues of methodology while simultaneously providing students with important background information that they will

need to understand the biblical text. The overall purpose of these chapters is to help students develop a responsible historical imagination that will enable them to read these texts as the literary creations of authors and editors who lived and worked in a social, ideological, and literary world that was in many respects very different from our own. Experience with this approach has shown that it works in the classroom. Instructors who are accustomed to other approaches are encouraged to give it a try and see how it works for them and their students.

## FINAL COMMENTS

Since textbooks typically go through multiple editions, instructors and students who think of ways in which this book might be improved are encouraged to send their comments and suggestions to the publisher, who will forward them to the author.

All quotations from the Hebrew Bible come from the New Revised Standard Version (1989 edition). Quotations from the Qur'an are taken from the contemporary translation of Majid Fakhry, *The Qur'an: A Modern English Version* (Reading, UK: Garnet, 1997).