TEACHING TIPS

Teaching the Bible to today's undergraduates can be quite a challenge, especially for an instructor whose graduate degree is in a non-biblical field such as systematic theology or world religions. Classrooms are increasingly divided between students who know the Bible but read it uncritically and students who know little or nothing about the Bible and/or the Judeo-Christian tradition, including students from other religious traditions. Students in the first group are often disturbed by their initial encounter with critical study of the Bible, while students in the second group have to work hard to grasp and retain the basic story line and contents of the Bible. How best to bridge the gap between these two groups of students is a question that plagues everyone who teaches a course on the Bible today.

The difficulties are even greater when the subject is the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Students (and instructors) from Jewish and Christian backgrounds have differing ideas of what the Hebrew Bible is about and which sections should receive the most attention, and Muslim students, who know alternate versions of many of the biblical stories from the Qur'an, bring yet another viewpoint to the classroom. The problem is compounded by the fact that virtually every "assured result" of academic scholarship on the Hebrew Bible is facing serious challenge today. Instructors from outside the field can no longer rely on what they might have learned in a course that they took in graduate school, much less what they know from church or synagogue. Even instructors with doctorates in Hebrew Bible have trouble figuring out how to introduce students to a field that today has few fixed points of reference.

The Hebrew Bible: A Comparative Approach aims to chart a fresh course through this quagmire. From beginning to end, the book takes seriously the fact that students come to the classroom with differing backgrounds and capabilities. No previous knowledge of the Bible is assumed; even the most basic stories and ideas are defined and explained in the readings. The book is written in a clear, simple style that students with average reading skills should be able to comprehend. The written material is supported by over 350 color photos that were selected for their ability to help students follow what is being said in the text. As long as students read the book, the instructor can use class time to build on the readings rather than explaining them.

The choice of a comparative methodology was also made with students in mind. Few students today enter the classroom with a burning desire to learn about the methods and findings of contemporary biblical scholarship, but many are keenly interested in other cultures, including the similarities and differences among world religions. Placing the Hebrew Bible in dialogue with other religions is an effective strategy for getting students to engage with the biblical text. Once engaged, they are more open to learning about the methods and findings of contemporary biblical scholarship. How much attention these two poles receive in the classroom will depend on the instructor. Those with a background in comparative studies might wish to bring in additional materials to enhance this element of the course, while those with more traditional biblical training might prefer to use class time to dig more deeply into some of the enduring questions of biblical scholarship. The text can be used with either approach.

A similar open-endedness can be seen in the book's treatment of the many critical issues that divide Hebrew Bible scholars today. Rather than endorsing one position as the "right" one, the book makes a sustained effort to introduce students to the major schools of interpretation and the reasons for their differences. On historical questions, for example, equal attention is given to the differing viewpoints and conclusions of "conservatives," "maximalists," and "minimalists."

As a result, students gain a better sense of how biblical scholars do their work than they would from a text that works from a particular scholarly position. Instructors are of course free to use their class time to argue for one viewpoint over another if they wish. But the book is suitable for use by instructors who hold differing critical perspectives on the issues.

The links below contain additional guidance for instructors who are using *The Hebrew Bible: A Comparative Approach* in the classroom.

Tips for Instructors Who Are New to the Field

Tips for Experienced Instructors

Tips for All Instructors

Tips for Instructors New to the Field

The last twenty years have witnessed a sea change in scholarship on the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Instructors who are new to the field (and anyone who has not taken a course on the Hebrew Bible in many years) should plan to do a substantial amount of background reading before teaching in this area if they hope to do justice to the subject matter. Below is a suggested reading program that will give the new instructor a good foundation for teaching an introductory course on the Hebrew Bible. The best resources in each category are marked with asterisks (*).

- 1. A good place to start is to read through two or three recent undergraduate Hebrew Bible textbooks and pay attention to which issues they highlight and how they present the issues. Several good options are listed below. Most include substantial bibliographies that can be useful for locating information on issues where more background is needed.
 - Bandstra, Barry L. *Reading the Old Testament: Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. 4th ed. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2008.
 - Bowley, James E. *Introduction to Hebrew Bible: A Guided Tour of Israel's Sacred Library*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007.
 - Collins, John J. Introduction to the Hebrew Bible. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004.*
 - Coogan, Michael D. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.*
 - Gravett, Sandra L.; Karla G. Bohmbach; F. V. Greifenhagen; and Donald C. Polaski. *An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: A Thematic Approach*. Louis ville: Westminster John Knox, 2008.
 - Harris, Stephen, and Robert Platzner. *The Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. 2nd ed. New York, McGraw-Hill, 2007.
 - Longman III, Tremper, and Raymond B. Dillard. *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.
- 2. A helpful next step is to read a couple of books that discuss the various methods that are used in the study of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the major controversies that have aroused scholarly debate over the years. Several titles that might be useful are listed below.
 - Arnold, Bill T., and David W. Baker, eds. *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004.*
 - Barton, John. *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*. 2nd ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996.
 - McKenzie, Steven L., and Haynes, Stephen R., eds. *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*. Rev. ed. Louis ville: Westminster John Knox, 1999.*
 - Knight, Douglas A., and Gene M. Tucker, eds. *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*. Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985.
 - Matthews, Victor H. *Studying the Ancient Israelite: Sources and Methods*. Grant Rapids: Baker, 2007.

- Rogerson, John W., and Judith M. Lieu, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.*
- Schmidt, Werner H. *Old Testament Introduction*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000.
- 3. Since *The Hebrew Bible: A Comparative Approach* examines the Hebrew Bible through the lens of comparative religion, instructors who have little training in the cross-cultural study of religion should plan to read a couple of introductory textbooks in this area. A number of good possibilities are listed below.
 - Bowie, Fiona. *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006.
 - Hall, T. William; Richard B. Pilgrim; and Ronald R. Cavanagh. *Religion: An Introduction*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986.
 - Livingston, James C. Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008.*
 - Pals, Daniel L. *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
 - Ring, Nancy et al. Introduction to the Study of Religion. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998.
 - Schmidt, Roger. Exploring Religion. 2nd ed. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1988.*
 - Smart, Ninian. *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.*
 - Smart, Ninian. Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999.
- 4. Along similar lines, instructors who are using *The Hebrew Bible: A Comparative Approach* should read a book or two on the "lived religion" of ancient Israel, since this is a major focus of the book. The following books offer good treatments of this issue.
 - Albertz, Rainer. A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992.*
 - Hess, Richard S. *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000.
 - Meyers, Carol L. *Households And Holiness: The Religious Culture Of Israelite Women*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005.
 - Miller, Patrick D. *The Religion of Ancient Israel*. Louis ville: Westminster John Knox, 2000.*
 - Zevit, Ziony. Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches. New York: Continuum, 2003.
- 5. Finally, new instructors would benefit from reading a book or two on the social world of ancient Israel (i.e., how people conducted their daily lives) so that they can situate the texts of

- the Hebrew Bible in a real-world social context. The books below provide a wealth of helpful information on this subject.
 - Benjamin, Don C., and Victor H. Matthews. *Social World of Ancient Israel: 1250-587 BCE*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005.*
 - Borowski, Oded. *Daily Life in Biblical Times*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.
 - De Vaux, Roland. Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997
 - King, Philip J., and Lawrence E. Stager. *Life in Biblical Israel*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001.*
 - McNutt, Paula. *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel*. Louis ville: Westminster John Knox, 1999.
 - Meyers, Carol L. *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- 6. For any other issues or questions that might arise during the course of the semester, the best resource is a good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia. Several good academic reference texts are listed below.
 - Arnold, Bill T., and H. G. M. Williamson. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005.
 - Baker, David W., and T. Desmond Alexander, eds. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003.
 - Freedman, David Noel, ed. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.*
 - Longman III, Tremper, and Peter Enns, eds. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, & Writings.* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2008.
 - Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob. *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 2009.

Tips for Experienced Instructors

For instructors who are accustomed to teaching introductory courses on the Hebrew Bible, much of the material in *The Hebrew Bible: A Comparative Approach* will be familiar, since there are certain issues that every introductory textbook must address. At the same time, a careful reader will note that there are viewpoints and perspectives that receive more attention in this book than in most other texts. Examples include:

- The role and influence of literate male elites in the production of the Hebrew Bible (both the individual books and the growing canon);
- The social and religious contexts in which the various books of the Hebrew Bible were created and preserved (particularly the exilic and post-exilic contexts);
- The common ideological presuppositions that run through most of the books of the Hebrew Bible (views of the physical universe, the supernatural, human nature, etc.);
- The polytheistic nature of ancient Israelite society, with strict Yahwists representing a minority of the population during much of the period covered by the Hebrew Bible;
- The psychological and social framework of the biblical purity system;
- The many and diverse expressions of "lived religion" in ancient Israel; and
- The religious experiences of people regarded as "prophets" in ancient Israel.

Instructors who disagree with any or all of these viewpoints are welcome to use them as foils for classroom instruction.

Even experienced instructors, however, might find themselves challenged by the book's use of an interpretive framework drawn from the comparative study of religion, since graduate programs in biblical studies generally provide little or no instruction in this area. Instructors are of course free to decide how much attention to devote to this aspect of the text in the classroom, but those who lack expertise in this area will find it easier to engage with the textbook (and to respond to student questions) if they read a couple of introductory textbooks in this area prior to using the text. Several good options are listed below.

Bowie, Fiona. *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006.

Hall, T. William; Richard B. Pilgrim; and Ronald R. Cavanagh. *Religion: An Introduction*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986.

Livingston, James C. *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008.

Pals, Daniel L. *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Ring, Nancy et al. *Introduction to the Study of Religion*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998. Schmidt, Roger. *Exploring Religion*. 2nd ed. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1988.

Smart, Ninian. *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Smart, Ninian. Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999.

Tips for All Instructors

Motivating Students to Read the Textbook

One of the benefits of using a textbook that is written at a level that ordinary students can comprehend is that it allows the instructor to use class sessions to develop, critique, or otherwise engage with the material in the assigned readings rather than rehashing and unpacking the ideas in the text. This can only work, however, if students are actually reading the book. Here are a few strategies for motivating students to do the assigned readings.

- 1. Hold daily or weekly quizzes on the readings. Students who know that they will be held accountable for the material in the textbook are more likely to read it. The task need not be burdensome for the instructor; a few short objective questions that can be answered at the beginning of each class, preferably on a Scantron form, are sufficient. The quiz can even be open-book as long as the time is limited (five to eight minutes).
- 2. Require students to prepare written responses to some of the exercises. Each chapter contains several exercises that relate directly to the content of the readings. As a rule, students cannot do well on these exercises unless they have read the chapter. If students are required to turn in written responses to some of the exercises from time to time, they will at least have to read the chapters on which they are writing.
- 3. Have students keep reading journals. Journals encourage students not only to read but also to interact with the assigned readings. Many instructors use journals as a way of keeping tabs on student reading, giving credit for the number rather than the quality of the entries. Such an expectation ensures that students will do the assigned readings.

Classroom Activities

Knowing that (most) students have read and understood the assigned readings frees the instructor to be more creative in the classroom. This is especially true for instructors who have a tendency to lecture most of the time. Studies have consistently shown that students grasp and retain information better when they (a) encounter it in various formats and (b) actively engage with the material that they are learning. Below are some suggestions for classroom activities that can help to promote this kind of learning.

1. Make regular use of small groups. Small groups, whether created for a single class period or retained throughout the semester, are an effective tool for getting students to engage with course material. Group activities need not take much time out of the class period; depending on the activity, students can meet in small groups for as little as five minutes or as long as the entire class period. Possible activities include assigning each group a biblical passage to analyze using insights from the day's readings; having each group complete one of the chapter exercises during class time; organizing a classroom debate between two or more groups of students over a controversial point in the day's readings;

describing a historical or contemporary situation that has analogies to the day's readings and asking students to discuss the parallels between the later situation and the biblical text; or describing the beliefs or practices of a modern religious group and asking students to reflect on the similarities and differences between that group and the people who produced the Hebrew Bible. Once the group has finished its work, group members can be asked to summarize their findings either orally to the entire class or in writing to the instructor (or both).

- 2. Assign students to lead class sessions. One of the most fruitful ways of learning and retaining any kind of material is to teach it to others. Since *The Hebrew Bible: A Comparative Approach* assumes that students have no prior knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, it is natural to suppose that students have nothing to contribute to the learning experience. But this is not the case. Depending on the size of the class, individual students or small groups can be assigned to do one of the chapter exercises or perform outside research on a point from the readings and share the results orally with the rest of the class. As with small group projects, such oral reports need not take up much class time; three to five minutes per report is usually sufficient. Regardless of the quality of the oral presentation, students will learn by doing the work.
- 3. Bring in guests from different religions. An easy and memorable way to reinforce the comparative religions framework of the textbook is to bring in guests from the local community whose religious beliefs or practices are similar to those discussed in the day's readings. For example, a Muslim could talk about how and why Muslims perform animal sacrifices as part of the Eid al-Adha festival; an Orthodox Jew and a Reform Jew could debate their differing views on how one obeys the laws of Torah; a Native American or a person from Africa could describe the activities of shamans or the rituals used in healing or divination ceremonies; or a charismatic Christian could discuss the importance placed on religious experience or the role of prophets in their churches. Such guests need not be experts; ordinary practitioners, even other students, can be just as helpful for this purpose. Nor need the guest take up the full class time; a short presentation followed by a question and answer time with the students can be quite effective. Students invariably find such encounters with people of other faiths interesting and informative, and they often retain what they learn from these experiences better than what they hear from the instructor.
- 4. *Use audiovisual resources*. In addition to traditional documentary films, the advent of YouTube, Google Video, and other Web-based video collections has made a wealth of free audiovisual material available for use in the classroom. Entering the words "Old Testament" or "Hebrew Bible" into the search engine on one of these pages brings up dozens of video clips, some of which have serious academic value. Even those that are unreliable can be used as teaching tools, i.e., the instructor can show one of them in class and ask students to critique what is being said in light of what they have learned from the readings or the course as a whole. In addition, there are numerous video clips on these sites that can serve the same purpose as outside guests, e.g., videos that depict animal sacrifice, shamans, divination rituals, or charismatic prophecy. Such clips are always more interesting to students than lectures, and the experience of critically evaluating a faulty video presentation can help to promote active learning of the course material.

5. Engage in critical dialogue with the text. Instructors will inevitably find points in the textbook with which they disagree, i.e., places where the presentation seems one-sided, poorly reasoned, or built on questionable presuppositions. Such instances offer a great opportunity for teaching students to engage in critical thinking. Instead of delivering a lecture on the subject, the instructor could (a) give the class a short article that takes a different point of view and ask them to identify how and why the two sets of readings disagree, or (b) assign a group of students (or the entire class) to research the point in question and share their findings with the class or debate the issue during class time, or (c) give a short presentation on the subject and then ask the class to discuss and evaluate the two options. While some students find it disconcerting to raise questions about the textbook, projects such as these can help students to see that biblical scholarship, like other fields of study, is a human enterprise requiring subjective judgments, and that scholars can respectfully disagree on important points of history or interpretation.

Written Assignments

Instructors vary widely in the kinds of written work that they use to evaluate their students. Some rely heavily on exams while others use a variety of written assignments as the primary basis for student grades. Below are some suggestions for written assignments that can help to reinforce what students are learning from the textbook.

- 1. *Textbook exercises*. The exercises that appear throughout the textbook were designed to test students' ability to apply what they are learning from reading the text. There are too many of these exercises for any one student to complete all of them in a single semester. But it is quite possible for the class as a whole to answer all of the questions. This can be done by assigning a handful of students (or perhaps one of the small groups described above) to write on each of the exercises. If desired, those who are responsible for each of the exercises can be asked to report verbally to the class on their findings. Alternately, the instructor might decide that there are certain exercises that are so important that all students should be required to complete them. Exercises that might fit this bill include Exercise 1 (chapter 1); Exercise 4* (chapter 3); Exercise 8* (chapter 4); Exercise 14 (chapter 7); Exercise 15* (chapter 8); Exercise 17 (chapter 10); Exercise 54 (chapter 21); Exercise 57* (chapter 22); Exercise 64* (chapter 24); Exercise 67 (chapter 26); Exercise 93 (chapter 32); Exercise 107 (chapter 34); and Exercise 120 (chapter 37). (Exercises marked with asterisks are especially significant.)
- 2. Research papers. Crafting a textbook is a highly subjective process, and there are bound to be situations where an instructor believes that the treatment of a particular issue is too brief or unbalanced. For most instructors, the default response is to prepare a lecture to fill in the gap or to balance what the textbook is saying. An alternate approach is to ask a group of students to research the issue and prepare a written report that can then be read or summarized during the appropriate class session. Such an activity replaces passive reception with active learning.

3. Application papers. While most of the material in *The Hebrew Bible: A Comparative Approach* focuses on the ancient historical context in which the Hebrew Bible originated, some of the material in the early chapters and most of the comparative materials that run throughout the book aim to relate the Hebrew Bible to the contemporary world. Various kinds of written assignments can be used to underline this aspect of the course. Several examples of such assignments can be found by clicking on the links below.

<u>Peer Interview Project</u> (students interview several friends or family members about how they and the people around them viewed Scriptures when they were growing up and how they view them now)

Religious Site Visit (students visit a synagogue, church, or mosque and write about how Scriptures are used in the worship service)

<u>Current Issue Paper</u> (students research how the Hebrew Bible is used by people on both sides of a contemporary social or political debate)

Bible and Arts Project (students analyze how an artist, filmmaker, or musician has used and interpreted the Hebrew Bible in a particular work of art; note that the textbook includes many paintings that would be well-suited for such a project)

<u>Interdisciplinary Paper</u> (students investigate how the Hebrew Bible might be applied to a particular issue in their own field of study)

Web Resources

The Study Guide pages on this website list web resources that might prove useful for teaching individual chapters of *The Hebrew Bible: A Comparative Approach*. But there are also many relevant sites on the Internet whose usefulness extends beyond a single chapter.

1. *Mega-sites*. A number of good Web sites contain links to academic articles and other online materials on various topics related to the study of the Hebrew Bible. Several of the largest sites are listed below.

http://itanakh.org

http://www.otgateway.com

http://www.etana.org

http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/bible4.htm

http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook1.html

http://www.bible-researcher.com/links08.html

http://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/okeanos.html

http://www.lib.washington.edu/NearEast/ancres.html

2. *Image sites*. Visual images from the ancient world are invaluable for helping students to envision ancient Palestine as a real place, while images from contemporary religions are useful for supplementing the comparative materials presented in the textbook. Both types of images are readily available on the Internet, and most can be easily copied for use in PowerPoint presentations or slide shows, though some include electronic watermarks. Some of the larger image sites are general in nature (e.g., stock photo sites or online art galleries), requiring a fair amount of sifting to find useful materials, while others are tailored specifically for biblical studies.

(a) General images

http://www.artres.com

http://www.istockphoto.com

http://www.bigstockphoto.com

http://www.wga.hu/index1.html

http://www.flickr.com

http://www.fotosearch.com

http://commons.wikimedia.org

http://images.google.com

(b) World religions images

http://www.worldreligions.co.uk

http://peterlanger.com/religion.htm

http://relarchive.byu.edu/world_rel.html

http://www.picturesindia.com/religion

http://www.tropix.co.uk/themes/religions rites architecture archaeology.htm

http://www.ponkawonka.com/cm/index.php

(c) Biblical art and images

http://www.biblical-art.com/text1.asp

http://www.textweek.com/art/scripture index OT.htm

http://www.artbible.info

http://www.allposters.com/-st/Old-Testament-Scenes-Fine-Art-

Posters c104144 .htm

http://www.instonebrewer.com/bpg2009/Free/Screen-sized%20pictures.htm

http://research.yale.edu:8084/divdl/eikon

3. Biblical maps and charts. While the geography of Palestine is covered in chapter 6, there are many other places in the book where instructors might find maps useful for presenting information about a particular topic. There are also a number of sites on the Internet that offer various kinds of charts that might prove useful as PowerPoint slides or handouts for

certain classes, though critical sifting is required on many of them. Links to both kinds of sites are listed below.

(a) Biblical maps

http://bible.org/maps

http://www.bearport.org/SatMap

http://www.ebibleteacher.com/imagehtml/batlas.html

http://www.painsley.org.uk/re/Atlas/default.htm

http://www.biblemap.org

http://www.bible.ca/maps

(b) Biblical charts

http://biblical-studies.ca/ot/ot_handouts.html

http://biblecharts.org/oldtestament.html

http://www.biblelights.com/charts.htm

http://www.uplook.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=category§ionid=4

&id=68&Itemid=56