

How to Teach This Book
The Bible: An Introduction
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Teaching an Introduction to the Bible is challenging for many reasons, among them are: the range of student knowledge, the attitudes and presuppositions of students toward the subject, the amount of material to be covered, and questions about the importance of the humanities. Additionally, since these texts have shaped Western culture extensively, even students with almost no knowledge of their content often have an emotional stake in particular kinds of readings.

Students in an Introduction to the Bible will range in their knowledge of the Bible from those who have no real exposure to its content to some who have significant portions memorized. Some will be disaffected by what they know of its content and use today, others have built the meaning of their lives on a particular type of reading of the texts. Such differences mean that teachers must try to see what each kind of student has at stake without losing sight of the importance of requiring critical thought. It is best to assume that students have no knowledge of the subject, just as we would assume they know nearly nothing about Hinduism if we were teaching an introductory course on that religion. The vague cultural knowledge students will have often does little to help them in this sort of course. My own mistakes of assuming knowledge of famous characters and events from the Bible has shown me that teachers should not assume students have any detailed knowledge of the Bible.

One of the first things an Introduction to the Bible needs to do is establish its relevance and place among the humanities as a study of how humans have and do make sense of their world. I think we can accomplish this with examples that show how religious beliefs, particularly some taken from the Bible, have been influential in political and social life throughout the last fifty years. We might mention and have examples of how people on both sides of the capital punishment or abortion debate cite biblical texts. I often show the first episode in the PBS Eyes on the Prize series that has clear evidence of both Dr. King and the KKK using Bible and Christian symbols to support their views. From there we can talk about the importance of good readings of these texts.

At a later point, I have often had the students use a values clarification instrument (some of which can be fun and interactive in small groups) to establish what the cultural values are of the class members. Then I ask them to compare those values with the ones found in particular biblical texts. This helps them recognize cultural and philosophical differences between themselves and the texts. This, in turn, opens them to dialogue about their presuppositions and values.

Another important issue to assert early on (and to repeat as the semester goes on) is that critical study (particularly historical-critical study) of the text is, in large part, trying first to understand the text on its own terms. That is, subjecting a text to critical study is a sign of respect for what it intends to be; understanding the genre and reading in accord with that form is both more respectful of the text and more honest. While this is comforting to some students, some will not want to grant ancient people the worldviews they had. But only by trying to understand those ideas can present-day readers get to the fundamental understandings of humanity and the cosmos expressed through those antiquated understandings of physical and scientific laws. This is a good opportunity to reinforce the humanities value of doing our best to understand the views of others on their own terms before assuming that we have nothing to learn from those different from ourselves.

The Bible: An Introduction tries to elicit the meanings of these texts by setting them in the historical context of their composition, not simply of the time they purportedly tell about. I try to see how the message of the texts sounded as they were received by their initial recipients. This also means that we must pay careful attention to the genre of each book and even sections within books. I take a significant amount of space discussing the importance of genre and then on identifying the genre of each book or section of a book when that is needed.

At the same time, this work acknowledges that the biblical texts are primarily theological documents in the sense that they intend to give an interpretation to events that put God in the center. I think this is an important element that many introductions do not give sufficient attention. Pressing the point that all of these texts knowingly turn away from historical accounts and from political or military interpretations to give theological interpretations helps free students to read these texts in more appropriate ways. This can also help students come to see the values in the different perspectives of different disciplines, and perhaps that these interpretations do not need to be mutually exclusive. Perhaps lessons in hermeneutics and epistemology are

unexpected in an introduction to the Bible, but I think they are vitally important for understanding the Bible and for the place of such a course in a humanities curriculum.

The maps and photos of the material culture of the ancient world found in *The Bible: An Introduction* intend to help open this originating world to students. They can help students recognize common needs, even as they see dramatically different responses to those human concerns. The textboxes along the way highlight some material in the text but also add historical facts and details not in the text. Some also provide hints about topics that engage scholars around particular texts or topics. Meanwhile, the introductory “At a Glance” boxes and the “Let’s Review” boxes at the end of each chapter help students see the larger outline and themes that are important for the material covered in a chapter.

From its beginning, this book was written with non-specialists in view. While I have suggested that the topics we cover in an introductory Bible course are complex, the way we discuss them at an introductory level can be accessible. I have tried to provide what introductory readers need in sections where complex ideas are introduced.

Given the range of material to be covered in an Introduction to the Bible, it may be helpful to have shorter exams more often, rather than simply giving a mid-term and a final. There are many ways to break down the material. In a semester syllabus on this website, I have tailored exams to follow (in general) the major sections of the textbook. But other divisions may work better. For example, rather than having an exam over the first three chapters (the initial section of the book), perhaps waiting until after the fifth chapter (that takes the course through the Pentateuch) would be helpful. Then rather than completing the rest of the Hebrew Bible, you might schedule another exam after the prophets, then another at the end of the section on the Hebrew Bible. Similarly, an exam after the chapters on the Gospels (or Acts) might help students. This website has short tests for each chapter that could be used to construct such exams.

I have often required a short paper that requires students to engage resources beyond the textbook and even beyond the bibliography at the end of each chapter of this textbook. The Preface of the book and this website contain some advice for students on how to begin research for such a paper. This kind of independent learning has sometimes helped my students see that the perspectives of critical study are not peculiar to the professor and the textbook.

A word for those whose field is not Biblical Studies

Taking on the task of teaching outside one's specialty can be a challenge—and the long history of biblical scholarship and the contentious nature of some of its exchanges do nothing to lessen the challenge. Still, biblical studies draws on the same combination of analytical tools used in other studies of religion and theology, even if sometimes in different proportions. This textbook focuses on the religious thought that comes to expression in the texts, rather than on the historical background of the time the texts talk about. I look for how these authors try to make meaning in the circumstances in which they find themselves. In this sense, this book examines the theology of the writers—their understandings of God, themselves, humanity, and the cosmos. Many fields of religious studies prepare one to undertake this kind of study, so it may not be as foreign as it seems at first. I have some practical suggestions above about what kinds of topics to broach and perhaps how to attempt that. I think these work for both specialists in biblical studies and those in other fields. In truth, some of the things I suggest are more comfortable for other fields than for those in biblical studies.

While I think the best way to approach these texts is to analyze them as theological documents, other approaches (many of which appear in the textbook and support the reading I give) provide necessary information and analyses. For example, if one's strength is in comparative religion, relying on that strength to supplement what this textbook does could make a strong class; or if theological studies were one's specialty, discussion of how various beliefs had their beginnings in biblical texts (and whether those developments were good directions) would also make a strong course.

Fortunately, there are some good tools that helpfully provide non-specialists with up-to-date positions on contentious issues and that lay out the issues that underlie the study of particular areas within biblical studies. I think that one of the first places to look is the *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Abingdon). This recently completed five-volume set provides significant background information, topical studies, and entries on individual biblical books. Its entries on sections (for example, the Torah or Gospels) and individual biblical books provide quick access to the most important issues and the important positions taken on them. A more thematic approach is found in the series entitled *Interpreting Biblical Texts*. Many of these

volumes are in the end of chapter bibliographies in *The Bible: An Introduction*. Looking to these volumes, then, has the advantage of allowing you to be prepared to discuss with students materials found in the bibliographies.

After these initial studies, turning to an introduction to each testament will be helpful. The choices here also depend in part on what you are looking for. If you want a quicker confirmation or rounding out of what you found in the NIDB for the Hebrew Bible, the book by John J. Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress) is excellent. For more extensive treatment of the issues, the longer introduction by the same author, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, will fill the need. A text offering a comparative religions approach that may be helpful is *The Hebrew Bible: A Comparative Approach*, by Christopher Stanley (Fortress).

Books that focus on more discrete sections within the Hebrew Bible may be useful and include the Interpreting Biblical Texts series mentioned above. Beyond those, the following are helpful:

Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, 2nd ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996.

Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life; An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

Nancy L. DeClassé-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms; A Song from Ancient Israel* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004).

New Testament resources also come from a wide variety of approaches. For a primarily historical approach to early Christian literature (both in the New Testament and beyond), the book *The New Testament; A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* by Bart Ehrman is a good beginning. A more extensive and more theologically oriented introduction is *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* by P. J. Achtemeier, J.B. Green, and M.M. Thompson. There are two standard technical introductions to the New Testament that together serve as excellent guides to the issues, history, and analysis of the New Testament writings:

Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed. ABRL. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 2 Vols. Minneapolis: Fortress, _____.

The first volume in the Koester introduction focuses solely on the historical and cultural setting of the New Testament writings. The second volume is on the writings themselves. The Brown volume provides discussion of major issues and extensive outlines of each book, with attention to theological issues.

The volumes listed above for each testament will direct you to further resources if you want something more in-depth than what they offer. However, my experience in teaching outside my specialty (for example, Introduction to World Religions), suggests that these books will usually provide what is needed for an undergraduate introductory course.