

A Word for Those Whose Field Is Not Biblical Studies

The Bible: An Introduction

Jerry L. Sumney

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.