

The Bible: An Introduction, Second Edition

An interview with student Zach Beck, Missouri State University

*What do students think of their introductory Bible courses, and why do they sign up to begin with? What perspectives do they bring to class, and how do they affect the classroom dynamic? How do their textbooks help them learn? We posed these and other questions to Zach Beck, a junior at Missouri State University, to get his thoughts on his introductory course and on how using Jerry L. Sumney's *The Bible: An Introduction, Second Edition* assisted him and his classmates in their learning!*



FP: Tell us a little about yourself. What school do you attend? What level of student are you? What is your major, and what are your academic interests?

ZB: Hi, my name is Zach Beck. I am currently a junior at Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri. I am a history major with a minor in religious studies. I am particularly interested in the forces, institutions, and individuals that have shaped—and continue to shape—the world today. I am especially enthralled by the past and present confluence of religion and both the major events of the world stage and the smaller but similarly pivotal matters of art, music, and literature. I am highly interested in the influence of religion—particularly Christianity—on society, especially the impact of Catholicism and the Inquisition on colonial Mexico.

FP: What motivated you to enroll in an introductory Bible course (required or elective)?

ZB: Having been brought up in the Catholic Church, I was in some ways well acquainted with Christianity and some of the writings of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, but I was (and am) intensely interested in learning more about Christianity—its origins, its major players, its impact, and what it has meant and means now in and to the world and those who adhere to the faith. As a religious studies minor, the class I took on the literature and world of the New Testament is not exactly mandatory, but to achieve the minor, one does have to take either the class on the Old Testament or the New Testament, and I obviously chose the latter.

FP: What level of interest in biblical studies did you have going into the course? How would you describe your level of knowledge about the Bible before taking the course?

ZB: I was extremely interested in biblical studies prior to taking Dr. Mark Given's New Testament course, and I was extremely excited to be enrolled in it, and I remained extremely excited throughout the course as I learned more and more about that which I knew very little. As I mentioned, having been raised in the Catholic Church, I was familiar with various readings from the New Testament, but I knew very little of the historical side of the Bible. The combination of my initial interest in the course and the lack of my knowledge concerning its content made the course highly fascinating and enjoyable. Dr. Given is a super great professor, as well.

FP: How would you describe the dynamics of your class? What perspectives did different students bring to discussion about critical study of the Bible? Was *The Bible: An Introduction* successful in providing an accessible introduction for students of various backgrounds and levels of knowledge about the Bible?

ZB: The dynamics of my particular class were very nice. The course was mostly lecture-based, but as students, we were of course encouraged to study the material and develop our own interpretations, with guidance from our textbook and instructor. *The Bible: An Introduction* was extremely successful in providing an accessible introduction to a wide variety of student types. Jerry Sumney's writing is remarkably clear and easy to understand, and because of this, the textbook is highly successful in conferring its points to students with various backgrounds and levels of knowledge about the Bible. While the biblical texts themselves can be at times

foreign, daunting, and confusing to the lay reader, Sumney is able to perpetually hit at the heart and focus of the matter, guiding the reader through a labyrinth of potential pitfalls. The confusing, difficult issues are analyzed and presented in their appropriate historical contexts, and the result is the ability of the reader to understand both what the issues meant then and what they mean now, thus allowing one to develop sound, appropriate viewpoints.

FP: What did you find enjoyable about your class, and what did you find difficult for you and your fellow students? Which topics caused lively discussion in class, and which did students find most difficult to grapple with?

ZB: First, Dr. Given was a fantastic professor, and his passion and enthusiasm was contagious. Sumney's book was also a lively, entertaining reader, and as a result, I consistently looked forward to doing the readings for the class. One issue that was difficult for me (and perhaps my classmates) and also greatly debated among our class as a whole was the Servant Songs of Isaiah. Growing up Christian, it seems the general, indisputable idea is that the Servant Songs are about Jesus. Looking at them in their original context, however, it is clear, as Sumney specifically mentions, that these were not intended at the time to be about Jesus at all. This was somewhat difficult to reconcile with the view that I knew and understood to be true. We wrote a paper on this very subject, and the resultant in-class discussion was very intriguing, with students' viewpoints encompassing the spectrum from "certainly not about Jesus" to "in the end, very much about Jesus." Our study of the book of Revelation was also very entertaining, and the chapter in our textbook was most enlightening and crystal clear in its breakdown of a very complex and, in some ways, mystifying book.

FP: How did *The Bible: An Introduction* aid you in learning? Was there anything that you found particularly beneficial about the book for you or your fellow classmates?

ZB: *The Bible: An Introduction* was extremely helpful in its clarity and straightforward analysis and discussion. Sumney's summaries of the biblical books and explanations of their purposes and themes were very easy to comprehend and left no major issues unaddressed. The way in which Sumney consistently touched upon the historical aspects of the books was highly helpful in allowing one to approach the biblical texts with a proper historical perspective. The little chapter side-boxes were, I found, particularly beneficial. Many of these contained additional information that was especially interesting to consider and analyze.

FP: Overall, what are your thoughts on using *The Bible: An Introduction* as a textbook?

ZB: *The Bible: An Introduction* is a fantastic textbook for an introductory course. The clarity of the writing and the smoothness with which Sumney guides the reader through the Bible is highly laudable and worthy of recognition. Sumney neither goes so deep into critical issues as to bewilder the reader or cause him or her to lose interest, nor does he skip over the difficult and perplexing questions and issues that the Bible presents throughout its books. The textbook is a reassuring guide, walking one through a maze of potentially confusing and easily misconstrued biblical texts. As a student who knew veritably nothing about scholarly considerations of the Bible, I found Sumney's book to be very satisfactory in fulfilling my curiosities and alleviating my concerns while simultaneously not burying me in a wealth of difficult theological or historical considerations. It struck a perfect balance for the introductory student.