

# TRAVERSING THE WORLD OF JEWISH STUDIES



## THE NONEXPERT AS BIBLE TEACHER: SOME REFLECTIONS

Alan Levenson

For nearly twenty years I have been teaching college-level Bible classes. I do not have a PhD in Bible. I have never studied Akkadian or Ugaritic. I never enjoyed years of prolonged, intense, and guided exposure to the literature of that field. I have never produced an academic work in the area (though I have written a study guide). I have been on one archaeological dig for one day. I might as well add that I was the product of a mediocre religious school education, and, despite efforts at remediation (formal and autonomous), I do not purport to be a master of *parshanut ha-mikra*, arguably an alternative “expert” discipline in Bible.

Charlatanism is rife in America, including the academy. But I do not think that my students or colleagues would consider me a charlatan, and that’s where the real questions emerge. If I am not qualified in a traditionally Jewish or in a secular

academic sense to teach this subject, how have I been able to do so for so long? I offer the following reflections as encouragement

to other nonexpert Bible teachers who have found themselves in comparable circumstances—possessing a PhD in Jewish studies, but in an unrelated field.

My Hebrew Bible teaching began in the religion department of a prestigious southern college as a one-year replacement. Although my area was modern Jewish history, there was a presumption that a Jew in Jewish studies ought to be able to teach a course titled “History and Religion of Ancient Israel.” The approach I adopted, which I suspect is rather widespread, was a compromise that involved following the canonical order (especially for the first five books—Torah/Pentateuch) and describing the other genres (history, prophecy, psalms, and wisdom literature) found in the remainder of *Tanakh*. There were quite a few “deer in the headlights” moments, including the

first time, though not the last, that someone asked me whether “Let us make man” (Gen 1:26) is a reference to the Trinity. Ironically, the holder of the other one-year replacement position, hired to teach New Testament, had recently completed a dissertation on Isaiah, and was far more qualified to teach the Hebrew Bible course.

The two of us began an odd *hevruta*: he would have me parse verbs, in the style of *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, and I would throw in an occasional modern Hebrew usage picked up on kibbutz, or a midrash I had learned in a couple of summers at the Jewish Theological Seminary. The second semester went better, but in both, I relied heavily on the footnotes in a couple of Bibles, the Anchor Bible series, and a couple of Old Testament introductions.

I OFFER THE FOLLOWING REFLECTIONS AS ENCOURAGEMENT TO OTHER NONEXPERT BIBLE TEACHERS WHO HAVE FOUND THEMSELVES IN COMPARABLE CIRCUMSTANCES—POSSESSING A PHD IN JEWISH STUDIES, BUT IN AN UNRELATED FIELD.

(Today's rookie nonexpert has much better resources: including the Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary, the New Jewish Study Bible, vastly superior Hebrew Bible textbooks and, of course, the Internet.)

For the next fifteen years most of my classroom Bible teaching took place at Siegel College, where the majority of students were Jewish adults. The dynamic differed from the typical undergraduate one in that the students had a greater familiarity with Scripture (many in the original Hebrew), greater eagerness to engage the subjects on a critical and personal level, and comfort with a much slower pace. Rather than introduce the entire Hebrew Bible, my colleagues and I generally taught a single book or even a single story (Joseph, for instance). Although these factors may appear to make the classes I taught upper level rather than introductory, this is not the case, as neither "Introduction to Hebrew Bible" nor Hebrew were prerequisite. Perhaps the nature of my assignments were upper level, but this only highlights the incongruity of a non-Bible specialist teaching Bible.

Naturally, the Jewish context of Siegel College shaped my Bible teaching—the students' preference for depth over breadth dictated a different approach from that employed in the secular academy. I have come to describe what I do in Bible classes as triangulation. First, we try to determine the *p'shat*, especially through careful attention to the Hebrew (you don't need a doctorate to use a concordance) and historical and cultural context. Second, we illuminate the verse/verses with *aggadot* and midrashim, often via Rashi, and often via Nehama Leibowitz's indispensable companions to the weekly portion. Thirdly, I bring a variety of modern scholarly readings to the table, often, though not exclusively, from Bible scholarship



From *Bible*. Berlin: Soncino Gesellschaft der Freunde des Jüdischen Buches, 1931. Image provided by The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary.

written with a Jewish sensibility (e.g. Robert Alter, Nahum Sarna, Jon Levenson, Michael Fishbane, James Kugel, Adele Berlin, Ilana Pardes, Aviva Zornberg, Meir Weiss, Ed Greenstein, Moshe Greenberg, Meir Sternberg, etc.). I try to be aggressively agnostic regarding which method of reading Scripture is "best." I turn to E. A. Speiser for source criticism or Fishbane for inner biblical exegesis or Phyllis Tribble for structural analysis with equal willingness. I do not privilege the traditional Jewish approach over

the modern critical (or vice versa), nor do I gloss over the sometimes incompatible agendas of these various approaches. While I like to underscore these different reading strategies, what I am mainly trying to cultivate is what the late Samuel Sandmel felicitously called "the Enjoyment of Scripture."

When I finally returned to teaching Bible at a Catholic university (a progressive school but one that still titles the course "Introduction to Old Testament"), the experience



was humbling. The previous fifteen years had given me a greatly enhanced ability to “chapter and verse” any question, familiarity with the terrain of biblical scholarship, and greater facility in linking biblical verses with actual Jewish practice via exegetical tradition.

But finding a coherent approach to the subject seemed rather more daunting than it had been when I was a rookie worrying mainly about preparing an organized class twice a week. Certainly the triangulation-style teaching I had used at Siegal College would be of little use, since it presumed a relationship between text and tradition not found outside the Jewish world. (Although the preference for locating biblical *Urschrift* over subsequent interpretation is correctly seen as a Protestant bias, I have not found any undergraduates overly willing to place late biblical, inter-testamental and midrashic works on the same plain as Genesis.)

If a Jewish approach to Hebrew Bible promised pedagogical disaster, what would serve in its stead? Since this course was *not* billed as “Bible as Literature,” which would have handed me my focus, what would I concentrate on: History? Canonical development? Literary merit? Religious realities? And how would I introduce the plethora of modern methods: Source criticism? Form criticism? Canonical criticism?

Inner-biblical interpretation? Gender analysis? Feminist theory? And, if I tried to get my sessions to do double-duty, covering both biblical content and teaching method, would students be able to process both halves of what I was attempting? Is mastery of the Bible’s contents equivalent to mastering the facts of English history? In most Bible syllabi I find the word “familiarity” in the stated course goals—I suspect this is little

GIVEN A MODICUM OF KNOWLEDGE,  
AND A HEALTHY DOSE OF SELF-SCRUTINY,  
THE NONEXPERT TEACHER OF BIBLE CAN  
TEACH THIS SUBJECT—NEITHER AS EXPERT  
NOR CHARLATAN, BUT AS AN EXPLORER  
OF THE WAYS IN WHICH THE TEXT CAN  
BE UNLOCKED.

more than a wistful hope that a generation bred on video games will have miraculously acquired the taste to read 750,000 words of an ancient text. Since “mastery” is not even a remote possibility, “familiarity” serves as a palliative for the instructor’s conscience.

In retrospect, the approach I adopted at the local Catholic university was nearly the same I had adopted eighteen years earlier at the prestigious southern college: a compromise between following the canonical order (especially for the first five books) and describing the

other genres (history, prophecy, psalms, and wisdom literature) found in the remainder of *Tanakh*. After two semesters, I am still looking for a better approach to this particular introductory course, but I am not convinced that a PhD in Bible would be of much help.

Joseph Schwab’s famous analysis of education enumerated four factors: milieu, student, subject matter, and teacher. I have said a few things about each of these, but I want to conclude with a word about pedagogy. As a matter of intellectual honesty, the nonexpert should regularly advertise his/her lack of expertise. The nonexpert should strive to highlight the multiplicity of approaches to the biblical text, the complexity of the Ancient Near Eastern context, and the life of the text in subsequent traditions—which no

nonexpert would be expected to have mastered. Given a modicum of knowledge, and a healthy dose of self-scrutiny, the nonexpert teacher of Bible can teach this subject—neither as expert nor charlatan, but as an explorer of the ways in which the text can be unlocked.

*Alan Levenson is Schnusterman Professor of Jewish Religious and Intellectual History at the University of Oklahoma. He is the author of An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thinkers: From Spinoza to Soloveitchik (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).*

*The Association for Jewish Studies wishes to thank the Center for Jewish History and its constituent organizations—the American Jewish Historical Society, the American Sephardi Federation, the Leo Baeck Institute, the Yeshiva University Museum, and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research—for providing the AJS with office space at the Center for Jewish History.*