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Confessions and Reflections: What Can the Bible Do for the Liberal Arts?

Alan Lenzi, University of the Pacific

Many in the field are asking about the Bible and the Liberal Arts. Although I do not presume to have untangled the relationship between the two definitively, I can recount how the intersection of two threads in my experience as an ABD helped me decide what biblical studies could offer an explicitly secular, Liberal Arts education. The first experience was a class crisis; the second was the need to obtain secure employment.

It was my first semester teaching Introduction to the Hebrew Bible. The course was being offered at a large state school in the Religious Studies department, and I was the adjunct hired to teach it. I lectured on Monday and Wednesday to 110 students in stadium seating and used two TAs to cover the five discussion sections that met at the end of each week. Lectures followed canonical order and gave students the big picture of various portions of the Hebrew Bible, while end-of-week sections looked in depth at a related issue. Lectures on "Creation in the Hebrew Bible" and "The Documentary Hypothesis," for example, preceded a section that probed Genesis 1 and 2; "The Plagues Narrative" and "Israel at Sinai" were prelude to a section treating the Ten Commandments (both versions). The arrangement seemed logical. The weeks passed. All seemed well. One can imagine my surprise, therefore, when a TA came to me five weeks into the course saying something along these lines: "Students don't understand what's going on. The Bible is falling apart in front of them, and they don't know where all of this is leading. There's too much detail. They can't put things together." [1]

Considering the possibility that the first Intro course I had designed was not perfect and facing the fact that responsibility for this problem was mine, I tried to empathize with my students' dilemma. Rather quickly I realized that I had failed to address a fundamental characteristic of the Hebrew Bible: it does not cohere, as do other books we moderns read, because it is an anthology — or better, a textual repository — for ancient Israelite traditions. I had not adequately prepared my students to deal with this fundamentally foreign characteristic. Although I would eventually argue that historically the canon gave a very broad, general coherence to the Hebrew Bible, I had decided to cover that issue in the last week of class, after the students got a sense of the diversity in the Bible. But now that the students were drowning in the diversity and the canon lecture was still nine weeks away, what could we do pedagogically to help them find coherence, if not in all the details of the biblical narrative, then at least in a more circumscribed goal of the course? We decided the students needed "mental pegs" upon which they could hang the detailed information they were expected to process; these would simultaneously help us clarify to them the goals of the course.

We considered providing a list of major themes to which the students could relate the biblical material: creation, exodus, kingship, Yahweh's holiness, etc. But as helpful as that may have been, I did not want students to walk away from the class having only learned the content of the Bible and its main themes.

In the last few years of my graduate training at Brandeis, I started thinking seriously about where I wanted to work — not just geography and particular schools, but kinds of schools in which I wanted to work. I had decided early on that I would not apply to divinity schools or seminaries. I was also reluctant about colleges that were explicitly denominational and strongly religious — though I admit I did end up applying to a few to increase my odds. So what does that leave me?, I remember thinking. The research university and the secular liberal arts college.[2] While I was ABD, I was fortunate enough to get teaching experience in both kinds of settings, so I was able to confirm that these were places I could happily work. During the last three years of graduate school, I applied to about twenty different institutions, nearly equally divided between these two categories. When in the first year I didn't get even a preliminary interview, I began to re-think what I had to offer.

My training had prepared me for the research university that more or less accepted Hebrew Bible and its cognate fields as a given, something comprehensive institutions were expected to cover. Publications, conference presentations, a research agenda, and good references, I figured, would be the priority qualifications for these openings. So I worked on these. But while doing this, I also wondered what to do about the other half of the schools I was considering. How could I translate my academic preparation into something attractive to the secular Liberal Arts college, an institution where studying the Bible is not necessarily an end in and of itself or important for historic or religious reasons alone? Related to this, a colleague was challenging me to relate biblical scholarship to the broader context of the Humanities curriculum, so that non-biblical faculty could appreciate its contribution.[3]

The time for sending out applications in the second year of my job search was about the same time I learned about the problem in my Intro course. So I decided my solution for the class would also need to address the challenges of seeking a job at a Liberal Arts college and the goal of articulating the place of biblical studies within the Humanities.

Building upon the methodological assumption that analytical categories used to investigate materials may be imposed from the outside (i.e., they need not be indigenous) and justified based on one's goals, I outlined four "major analytical categories" that could help my students organize and interpret the detailed data they were learning. The following is a digest of what I gave them.

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Composition. Hebrew Literature: Becoming Careful Readers

Books in the Bible rarely had one author as in modern books. Therefore, we will talk about how texts (chapters, sections, books, and entire portions of the Bible) came together in ancient Israel to form the Bible. We will consider oral background to stories, written documents that may have been sources, and the process of editors shaping parts into a whole. Sometimes we can discern clear structural features in biblical texts that help organize them (e.g., Genesis' Toledot formulae) or an editorial unity that conveys a message for the entire book (e.g., Judges). Other times, the redaction is difficult to understand (e.g., Jeremiah), complex due to continued reworking (e.g., the story of Hezekiah and Sennacherib), or so complicated that it looks like a hodge-podge of ideas (e.g., Exod 19). The minute details of each and every one of these processes are not as

important in this class as learning the general ideas surrounding the process itself <dash></dash> with some examples to support your understanding. The goal is to make you a careful, critical, and more informed reader of the biblical materials.

Conversation. Israelite Society: Discerning and Appreciating Diversity

Throughout the semester, we will see that the Bible rarely presents one view on a topic. One could say that diversity on a topic shows that there was a conversation going on in Israel about it. Some examples. Creation: There are several texts that deal with the process of creation. Though these are often broadly similar, they also each contribute distinctive notions about the process, event(s), or agents involved. Kingship: Should Israel accept kingship or resist it? One can find texts to support both views. Gentiles: How should Israel relate to the nations around it? The Books of Jonah, Daniel, Esther, and Ezra-Nehemiah give several perspectives on this. There are other examples you could choose. Know general texts that exemplify this "conversation" idea and be able to explain how they do so generally. Recognize that part of this conversation process was about Israel constructing its own national identity and explaining/understanding the various events that befell it. The goal here is to appreciate the diversity in the Bible as a reflection of the diversity of concerns among its ancient Israelite contributors.

Cultural Embeddedness. The Ancient Near East: Putting Data in a Broader Context

We will see many examples of how inscriptions from, or activities of, neighboring cultures shed light on the Hebrew Bible. Some marquee examples: Balaam and the Deir Allah inscription (tradition), Gilgamesh XI and the flood account (myth), and Sennacherib's third campaign and 2 Kgs 18–19 (political history). Other examples that we will discuss include the psalms and the idea that they probably each had an attendant ritual based on analogy to Mesopotamian prayers (religious ideas), the debate about the historicity of key figures (David is probably mentioned in the Mesha inscription), the idea of creation (cosmology), and the impact of political-economic circumstances on the rise and message of the prophets (social history). The goal of this category is to help you understand how the broader culture of the ancient Near East informs our understanding of the Hebrew Bible.

Construction of Authority. Israelite Ideology: Understanding the Rhetoric of Persuasion

How did Israelite authors decide to argue their ideological points with authority or present their ideas persuasively? Sometimes they put their own words in the mouth of an ancient or supreme authority (e.g., Moses in Deuteronomy, Yahweh in Job), interspersed their words throughout an earlier narrative to shape it according to their ideas (e.g., the Priestly source in Gen 1–11), created an ancient fictional account to condemn a contemporary, similar practice (e.g., the golden calf incident in Exodus 32 at Sinai and Jeroboam's golden calves in 1 Kgs 12 at Dan and Bethel), claimed a visionary experience to authenticate their words (e.g., the prophets, see especially Jer 1, Isa 6, and Ezek 1–3), or added their words alongside a prophet's in order to recycle them for a contemporary event (e.g., the "Judah redaction" of Amos). The goal here is to discern, describe, and interpret instances like the above <dash></dash> there are others <dash></dash> that can exemplify this idea.

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The categories obviously relate to the traditional methods of biblical scholarship but also encourage mental habits that easily translate to other bodies of data in religion and the Humanities in general.[4] Thus, the categories give continuity between my teaching and the discourse of biblical studies as a discipline while also providing a pragmatic framework for achieving my pedagogical aims. Moreover, coming to terms over the course of the semester with how these categories relate to the particulars of any given text or collection in the Bible ultimately contributes to making the canon lecture more comprehensible.

I give these categories to my students at the beginning of the semester now, and I explicitly use them in my lectures, pointing out several examples of each or how two (or three) categories intersect in the details of a particular text. But it still takes about five weeks, around the time of the first exam, for the students to begin flailing about in the details and looking for something to make everything hold together. When this happens, I remind them explicitly about these categories and urge the students to use them to interpret the data they are learning. By the end of the semester, the students have gotten a lot of practice and know how I expect them to use the analytical categories. I also tell them that these categories form the basis of the final exam, and I give them some examples beforehand. The following is something I actually used on the test that first semester:

As I have shown throughout the semester, the Hebrew Bible does not always present a monolithic view on some subjects. Instead, it preserves several differing views and allows them to remain in tension, if not open contradiction. I have called this feature of the Hebrew Bible "conversation." Discuss and demonstrate with several examples in this essay the idea that the Hebrew Bible often preserves "conversations." Furthermore, please choose at least two examples (of your several) that also permit you to comment on compositional techniques in the Hebrew Bible, broadly speaking.

Knowing that the four analytical categories form the basis of the final is both intimidating and empowering for students. It is intimidating because the answer is not somewhere on the page. Rather, they must decide what to include, how much detail to muster for support, and how to present it all within the time period they have — it's an essay exam and students generally hate those. But the question is also empowering because they are in charge of utilizing what they have learned to communicate their ideas, allowing them to build on their strengths and avoid their weaknesses. I encourage them to "make the case" for a relationship they see; they need not limit themselves to what I have said or believe. The results have been encouraging as have student evaluations. Rather than simply regurgitating facts and filling bubbles on a Scantron, students engage the text and have the freedom to apply analytical categories creatively to support broad, synthetic ideas about the Bible. Rather than learning what to think, they are learning how to think — the hallmark of any good educational endeavor.

I will openly admit that there is nothing revolutionary here. I am merely turning a potential use into an explicit requirement. I will also freely confess that implementing this new approach did not suddenly get me a job. (I did not get any interviews the second year I applied, either.) By the third year of job hunting, I had used similar ideas in several other classes and could talk

comfortably about their benefits. Of course, the employment process is too complex (from the candidate's perspective) to suggest that one element is the determining factor in getting a job. But, I am convinced that thinking about, articulating, and implementing ideas that specifically address the contribution biblical studies can make to a student's liberal education is good for everyone concerned: the job candidates, lecturers, students, schools, and ultimately the field itself.

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Notes

[1] See likewise Kristin Swanson and Robert Shedinger, "Putting It All Together: New Historicism and Teaching the Hebrew Bible in a Church-Related College" (*SBL Forum* [<http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=367>]).

[2] On the chances of getting a job within such a narrow range of schools, see the humorous remarks of Jacques Berlinerblau, "The Unspeakable in Biblical Scholarship" (*SBL Forum* [<http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=503>], third to last paragraph).

[3] The idea was to go beyond the classic statement, which runs something like this: The Bible is a pillar of Western civilization and any educated individual should know something about it. As true as that may be, the question should still be asked, Beyond learning content or becoming aware of scholarly criticism, what else can biblical studies offer students?

[4] I make it clear that these are just my four categories; many others could be explored, including formulations that match students' own interests.

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