

Introduction

What one learns, it is no secret, depends in no small part upon where one learns it. This principle applies at many different levels—geographic, cultural, political, and institutional. Location, as they say, is everything. Or almost everything. The focus of this volume is upon one particular location: the classroom. To be sure, the classroom is not the only locus for learning, nor is it always the most conducive. Most of the teacher and student preparation for a successful educational event, moreover, takes place outside the classroom. The traditional classroom setting nevertheless retains a tremendous capacity for enhancing or impeding student progress and enthusiasm in practically every field of study, and not simply by virtue of its ubiquity. Notwithstanding the promises (or threats?) made by proponents of “distance learning” and other alternatives, the classroom—whether it is in a college, seminary, church, or synagogue—is here to stay for the foreseeable future.

The purpose of this volume is to make available to those who teach biblical studies a wide range of effective classroom strategies for approaching specific topics in the field. Books on pedagogy have proliferated dramatically in recent years. These books fall, more or less, into one of two categories: those that focus on theory and those that focus on practice. Excellent teaching clearly requires a sound pedagogical philosophy. One resource that deserves special mention in this regard—and not simply because it happens to have the same title as the present volume—is Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998). This excellent collection of essays addresses a variety of postmodernist and postcolonial pedagogies in the teaching of the Bible.

Sooner or later, however, theory must take the form of concrete practices or else it becomes like the proverbial tree falling in the forest—it effectively makes not a sound because no one is there to hear it. In this regard we highly recommend the resources made available by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion (<http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu>). Although it does not deal exclusively with biblical studies, the Wabash Center website contains a

wealth of information, including a guide to Internet resources and a list of recommended books on pedagogy. The Wabash Center's quarterly journal (*Teaching Theology and Religion*), especially its "Notes from the Classroom" section, features discussion of specific teaching strategies together with theoretical reflection of the first order. Strategies for teaching biblical studies are indeed plentiful but they are scattered among numerous books, journal articles, websites, and religion departments. This compilation brings together the collective pedagogical wisdom of dozens of innovative teachers from around the world, and we are grateful to them for sharing their "secrets" with the rest of us.

Nearly every work on pedagogy places a high premium on active learning. The transfer model of education—the notion that the teacher is the "sage on the stage" who possesses all wisdom which is transferred, mainly by lecture, into the knowledge base of the students—is going largely by the wayside. In this model, students passively take notes as the teacher tells them the information that they need to know; students then reproduce a body of knowledge on exams. By default, this is how many teachers begin their careers, in part because most graduate programs in biblical studies make little or no place for sustained reflection on pedagogical issues. For someone with an advanced degree, learning to lecture is relatively easy. But research consistently shows that even the best lecturers have a limited capacity to engage the attention of students, to improve retention of material, and to cultivate critical thinking skills. To facilitate student progress, the "sage on the stage" must, at least on occasion, act as the "guide on the side," empowering students as junior partners in a collaborative educational enterprise.

Once one is armed with effective teaching techniques, there remains the task of implementing them in specific biblical studies courses. "How do I adapt generic learning activities to fit the content I teach?" asks Maryellen Weimer (*Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002], 70). This is easier said than done. Weimer believes that

[W]e greatly underestimate the complexity of the process involved in taking a generic active learning strategy and adapting it so that it fits the content, learning needs of students, instructor style, and instructional setting in which it will be used. The process is rarely addressed in active learning material or workshops. The focus there is on building a collection of techniques, an important objective, but real teaching skill shows itself in the management of that technique repertoire.

Simply knowing where to start is difficult for many teachers. We hope that this collection of strategies will be of assistance in adapting generic strategies to fit the specific content of courses on the Bible.

We have turned to our colleagues to gather creative ideas for enabling students to acquire new information, practice new skills, and reorganize or build upon what they already know. For all of the collegiality in our field, in our classrooms we remain isolated. We walk in and—perhaps in the name of academic freedom—close the door behind us; classrooms are sacred spaces that no one else invades. Except for the occasional obligatory peer review, we rarely see how other teachers conduct their classes. There is no foolproof method for becoming a stimulating instructor, nor is there any rigid formula for identifying effective classroom practices. But at most institutions a consensus emerges as to which teachers engage their students and which ones do not. We may not be able to define “good teaching,” but we know it when we see it. No other resource (to our knowledge) makes available such a wide range of strategies for approaching specific subjects in the field of biblical studies.

The present volume is an eclectic compendium. Each “entry” assumes a critical, academic approach to the Bible, but entries come from a variety of methodological, theological, and ideological perspectives. They vary in length and in sophistication. Some entries are best suited for an introductory class, others perhaps for an upper-level university or seminary course. Many entries draw on resources already available on the Internet by telling readers where they can find the relevant information and materials to use in presentations. The entries, however, do not presume a high level of technological expertise or high-tech classrooms. While most entries outline specific activities or assignments for a single class session, a few provide a more general introduction to a certain set of practices or approaches for those who may not have special expertise or previous exposure (e.g, the incorporation of archaeology, “the Bible and Film” courses, and the like).

Some of the entries spell out a classroom activity in more detail than others—that is, some entries explicitly utilize active learning techniques while other entries may outline a particularly creative way to present a text or topic. Those who prefer lecture or some other teacher-oriented format can easily take the active learning entries and incorporate them into their presentations, and those who prefer a student-oriented format can quite easily transform an entry detailing an innovative presentation into an activity or exercise. Many of the entries feature good discussion questions, which are the key to framing productive active learning exercises. Readers can decide the format—small-group work, plenary discussions, test questions, paper prompts—in which those questions are best employed in their particular educational context.

In a volume this diverse it is only natural that readers will likely find something objectionable. Indeed, some may disagree sharply with the historical, ethical, or theological content of one piece or take issue

with the execution of another. As much as possible we have tried to avoid discriminating on the basis of theological or scholarly content, at least where respectable scholars can legitimately disagree on a given question. Had we approached the project with too many filters in place—for example, inclined to favor only those strategies that take a strictly historical approach or those attending to the social location of the interpreter—we would have prematurely excluded valuable resources or foreclosed certain worthwhile discussions.

Accordingly, we have striven not necessarily to present a collection of strategies that any and all teachers would, or even could, employ in the classroom. (The vast majority, however, do fall into this category.) Rather, we aimed at presenting “reports from the front,” so to speak, without attempting to be exhaustive. Sometimes good teaching takes risks or meets resistance. Part of the value of this collection, we believe, is that it will generate conversation, even—or perhaps especially—when one takes issue with the content or the manner of presentation. The contributors’ ideas, to be sure, have stimulated our own thinking. In fact, we have already successfully implemented a number of their strategies into our own classrooms. Furthermore, we have occasionally put different contributors into contact so that they might learn from one another as well. In this and in other ways, we have conceived of this volume from the outset as a collaborative enterprise.

Each entry, therefore, represents a highly compressed form of practical scholarship. While the entries do not directly respond to one another, they do create a dialogue of sorts as there are multiple entries on similar texts or topics. This volume has been written by the guild of biblical scholars for the guild. The 273 entries have been written by 93 different professors who have taught in a wide range of educational contexts—small colleges, major state universities, and seminaries.

Although our objective was not to reflect the status quo or to present a perfectly representative sample of academic biblical studies instruction, we suspect that this collection provides something like a snapshot of the discipline in this first decade of the twenty-first century from a number of different angles. For example, the collection of entries is uneven; some biblical texts have many more entries than others. Apparently, Numbers, Obadiah, and 2 Peter appear less frequently on course syllabi than Genesis, Job, and 1 Corinthians, hence teachers have many more creative ideas regarding the latter than the former. Likewise, there are more entries devoted to Gen 22 (four) than to the entire book of Isaiah (three). Perhaps this reflects a natural proclivity toward narrative, or toward theologically challenging texts, or toward texts with numerous intertexts—artistic renderings, for example. Or maybe it reveals a deep interest in the character of “father Abraham,” or a debt to Kierkegaard, or a Christian fascination

with child-sacrifice as somehow salvific. But whatever the reason in this specific instance, the general unevenness of the entries indicates where we spend our teaching energies, which, of course, says a great deal about the current state of the biblical studies classroom.

What else did we discover about our field in the process of soliciting material from colleagues who teach at several dozen different institutions? Among other things, the collection of entries shows that the rising generation of teacher-scholars is more likely than previous generations to draw on popular culture in formulating effective teaching strategies. In addition, a small but growing number of teachers are beginning to engage the interpretive traditions of Islam as a way of bringing together the three Abrahamic faiths in constructive conversation. Last of all, despite the inroads made by Jewish scholars and scholarship, it remains far more common to find teachers referring to Christian exegetical traditions as a resource for understanding the biblical text. Some of these trends are due in part to demographic realities or curricular constraints (e.g., Jewish scholars comprise a minority of the professorate; the academic calendar does not allow sufficient class time for equal or adequate coverage of all parts of the Bible; etc.). Some are perhaps the legacy of a jaded past while others may hold out great promise for the future. By highlighting these trends, our hope is that this compilation will serve as a valuable resource for further reflection and collaboration on these and other pedagogical issues relating to the teaching of the Bible.

Finally, a few thoughts on how to use the book. The entries are divided into three sections. Part One contains a number of strategies for introducing general skills and concepts in biblical studies courses. Parts Two and Three are devoted to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the New Testament. The organization of the entries in these sections roughly follows the canonical order of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. (Note: For the Hebrew Bible, the order of texts corresponds to that found in Bibles printed in Hebrew, not to the order of the NRSV or other editions which follow the order of the Protestant or Catholic Old Testament.) The layout of the volume makes it easy to consult all the entries on a given text or topic. One may choose to read through large sections at one time as preparation for a course or unit on a specific subject or section of the canon. The volume may also serve primarily as a reference tool, a resource to which one turns daily in preparing for class. Cross references at the end of several entries direct the reader to other entries that treat similar topics or pursue similar strategies, when such links are not already evident from the arrangement of each sub-section. (Note: Entries by the same author are not cross-referenced, as each author's entries are located on the list of contributors.) An index of biblical references is also included, as well as indices devoted to music, art,

film, and literature, for those who wish to incorporate certain kinds of materials into their lesson plans. All abbreviations of ancient and modern sources conform to the lists in *The SBL Handbook of Style* (ed. P. H. Alexander et al.; Peabody, Mass. : Hendrickson, 1999).