



Book Review

The Jewish Bible: A JPS Guide, Carol Huppig (ed). Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 2008.
Reviewed by Adam Porter

Introduction

The goal of this book is to be a “concise companion to the Bible” (vii) and succeeds admirably. It offers short and accessible essays on various issues related to the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) from the Jewish perspective. I will briefly summarize these chapters before considering its possible usefulness in a secondary school setting.

Summary

The chapters in the book fall into five parts. The first part includes introductory material about the Bible. This reviews how Jewish and Christian (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant) canons differ; discusses the origins and transmission of the Hebrew text, which is the basis for all modern translations; outlines the importance of the Torah scroll and how it functions in the synagogue liturgy; sketches the history of how the Bible has been translated into various vernaculars; and finishes with a discussion of how to translate gendered language.

The second part consists of five chapters discussing different genres of biblical literature. These short but substantial essays offer basic introductions to Biblical storytelling, law, poetry, prophetic literature, and wisdom literature. For each, there is discussion of techniques biblical authors used and specific examples to illustrate the techniques or ideas.

The third section consists of three chapters that focus on the Jewish interpretative tradition. The first discusses different methods of biblical study, both traditional and modern. These methods are then illustrated in the following chapter, which discuss biblical commentaries, which sought to explain the Bible for different ages and audiences throughout history. Several different commentaries are compared by examining several key passages. The last chapter in this section focuses on *midrash*, the way Jews have asked questions of the biblical texts and supplied answers from it. This section includes examples of *midrash*, as well as explaining its rationale and rules.

The fourth section of the handbook summarizes the books in the Bible. For each book, there are paragraphs explaining the book’s title, contents, and a discussion of what is of special significance in the book.

Finally, the fifth section consists of an extensive glossary of words, terms, and important people; a family tree from Adam to Moses’ descendants; a timeline; a selection of famous quotes; nicely illustrated maps; a list of recommended books; and a helpful index.

(A fuller description and summary of the book can be found in Gilbert Lozano’s review of Carol Huppig, ed., *The Jewish Bible: A JPS Guide*, Review of Biblical Literature [<http://www.bookreviews.org>] (2009); http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/6886_7459.pdf.)

Pedagogical Possibilities

The biggest question secondary school teachers might have concerning this book is its denominational origin, as it is published by the Jewish Publication Society. While it is true that the JPS publishes mainly Jewish texts, this handbook does not make any attempt to proselytize or denigrate other religions. Its goal

is to explain the Jewish approach to the Bible, which is quite different than Christian, especially Protestant, approaches. Jews, as the handbook points out repeatedly, think the Bible has a multiplicity of meanings; the same story can be interpreted by the same person in *very* different ways. Since there is no single Jewish way to interpret the text, the book implicitly invites other interpretations (Christian, Muslim, secular literary, etc.) of the Bible.

Especially for teachers unfamiliar with the Jewish interpretative tradition, this book would be excellent to read, as it is short and accessible. It could be used as the basis for specific lessons, such as the following:

The five chapters on different genres of biblical literature could be used as introductions to modules on these different types of literature.

The chapters on the Jewish interpretative tradition might be paired with other material discussing the Christian interpretative tradition. It might be interesting, for example, to find examples of contemporaneous Christian and Jewish interpretations of the same story from different time periods (perhaps late antiquity, the medieval, and post-Reformation), as a way to begin discussion of how the same text can be interpreted in multiple ways. This volume would facilitate this because it provides summaries of the different Jewish interpreters, as well as bibliographic information about finding their works in English translation.

If the instructor wanted to discuss how the Bible is used in contemporary liturgical settings, the first few chapters of the book would be helpful. There are, for example, similarities in the way a text is carried in procession in synagogues and more liturgical churches (Orthodox, Catholic, Episcopal). Interesting, too, is the question of why most Protestant denominations do not incorporate such practices in their worship.

In short, this text could be a very useful resource for a teacher.

Would this book perform well as a classroom text? Perhaps. It has many strengths: it is short, easy to read (certainly within the capability of upper level high school students), and illustrates its discussion with specific examples. It also has learning aids, such as text-boxes, a glossary, and so forth.

But it has problems, too. I would expect most classes on the Bible to cover portions of the New Testament, about which this book, understandably, is silent. Thus, it would need to be supplemented by additional texts. Other texts may also be required to offer explanation of other interpretative traditions. History demonstrates that any given group's interpretation of the text shifts over time; it also shows that different groups interpret the same text quite differently, depending on their assumptions about the text. This textbook illustrates the former point well, but another book or books would need to be selected to illustrate the latter point.

Do these difficulties outweigh its strengths? Teachers will have to answer that question for themselves. But even if not chosen for a classroom textbook, this excellent book would be a wonderful reference for teachers to have.

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