



Book Review

Sandra L. Gravett, Karla G. Bohmbach, F.V. Greifenhagen, and Donald C. Polaski. *An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: A Thematic Approach*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

Reviewed by Michael Chan

This interesting and creative project is a bold attempt to introduce the Hebrew Bible (HB)/Old Testament (OT) in a way that will connect with contemporary concerns and core humanities values. In fact, as introductions to the Hebrew Bible go, *An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* is unique among others in its genre precisely because of the authors' use of humanities categories to organize their presentation. Clearly, the four authors of this book have given a great deal of thought to how one effectively communicates biblical literature to contemporary audiences. For this reason, public school teachers might want to pay close attention to both the content and the presentation of *An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*.

Contrary to the approach taken by many HB introductions, *An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* follows neither a canonical ordering of the biblical books (be it Jewish or Christian), nor does it follow any historical schema. The book is decidedly nonconfessional and nontheological, and organizes biblical literature around humanistic issues like identity, power, and gender. These organizational categories, in turn, form the basis for individual chapters (e.g., Chapter 4: Family; Chapter 5: Gender; Chapter 7: Ethnicity; Chapter 9: Introducing Power). Admittedly, some of these loaded terms may need filling out in a high school setting, although students in 10th- and 12th grade classrooms are already familiar with the issues behind them. In addition, the chapters are largely independent, allowing the teacher to jump around with relative freedom. That being said, a basic knowledge of the first three chapters will be helpful, for they provide a basic historical and chronological framework (Chapter 1: Space and Time), an introduction to translation and interpretation (Chapter 2: Reading the Hebrew Bible), and an introduction to identity as an object of inquiry (Chapter 3: Introducing Identity).

Several features of this book make it user-friendly from the perspective of the teacher. Firstly, each chapter contains not only a set of discussion questions but also a general summary of the material covered, a list of suggested biblical readings, and resources for further reading. These elements alone save the teacher a great deal of time and research. Plus, each chapter begins with iconic, thought-provoking quotations that could easily be used as a focus exercise at the beginning of class. Without much difficulty, a teacher could turn these chapters into units or individual lesson plans.

Secondly, while the book is nonconfessional in orientation, the authors recognize that the Bible, in its various forms and translations, has played a fundamental role in the shaping of religious communities and imaginations. Judaism and Christianity have arisen, in part, because of *particular readings* (interpretations) of the Bible, many of which have had profound consequences on world history. A subsection in chapter one, "Ways of Reading the Hebrew Bible," addresses the issue of interpretation head on. The authors talk about how different questions one poses to a text often result in very different answers. Jews and Christians, however, are not the only readers of the Bible. Historians, literary critics, film producers,

musicians, artists, and many others also read the Bible, and their interpretations have often played a powerful role in shaping popular understanding of the Bible, sometimes even more powerful than religious or confessional readings. Exposure to a variety of interpretations could help students develop an appreciation for the many viewpoints that influence biblical interpretation.

The authors also deal at length with the complex reality of translation and textual reconstruction in chapter 2. This chapter may be one of the most valuable, for it introduces learners to the challenges of constructing a readable Bible in a modern language. On pages 46-53, the authors discuss textual criticism, where scholars, especially translators, look at the various versions of the Hebrew Bible (e.g., the Greek Septuagint and the Hebrew Codex Leningradensis) and attempt to restore the original form of a given text or book (if there ever was only one original form!). Chapter 2 also promises to be one of the most difficult to teach, for most religious traditions do not prepare students to recognize the power their own situation holds over their interpretation. The teacher should be prepared to encounter student questions and perhaps resistance.

But would *An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* serve as a good textbook in a public secondary school setting? As with the selection of any textbook, a number of issues come into play: the reading level of the students, the religious makeup of the community, the appropriateness of the content (e.g., sexuality issues are brought up at multiple points), etc. *An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* is well-written, clear, and insightful. I hesitate, however, to recommend it as a textbook for high school students.

My hesitancy is primarily because the authors seemed to have college-age students in mind – at least, they claim to have tested their materials on students within this age bracket (see xi-xii). To my mind, *An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* will be most valuable to teachers as a resource for unit and lesson planning. For example, because of the authors' sensitivity to contemporary trends in media and culture, the book contains significant resources for the development of student projects that involve a large amount of creative energy and technology. For instance, Chapter 5, which deals with gender, analyzes six biblical characters (Samson, Jacob, Esther, Jael, Ruth, and Naomi) from the perspective of gender norms in Israelite culture. I could easily imagine turning Chapter 5 into an assignment that deals with comparing and contrasting contemporary hypermasculine or hyperfeminine characters in American culture with the Bible's own hypermasculine or hyperfeminine characters. Such a comparison would allow students to see how American culture differs from and is similar to biblical representations of gender.

An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible will undoubtedly be a huge success as an undergraduate textbook. The book also has the potential to be a powerful resource for the high school teacher who is willing to use the book as a resource for lesson and unit planning. While the teacher may have to modify her/his lessons to meet the abilities of the class, I have no doubt that the categories and angles that the authors employ will prove helpful in high school classrooms.

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