

Interview with Dr. Jeffrey Leonard

Associate Professor, Samford University

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LaToya Leary: Hi Dr. Jeffrey Leonard. It's great to meet you... thank you so much for meeting with us. I want you to first tell us about who you are and what you study.

Dr. Jeffrey Leonard: Well, I'm a professor here at Samford University and the areas that I specialize in are Hebrew Bible and Hebrew. Normally, I'll have an introduction to the Bible class that all of our undergraduates will take, not necessarily from me but one of our ...standard courses. ...I've got one level of Hebrew that I'll be teaching and then usually an upper level. Those kind of roll around from Psalms to Torah to Prophets to Mesopotamian religion.... I did my graduate work at Alliance Theological Seminary in Nyack, New York. Then, I did my PhD work at Brandeis University up in Boston. I've been at Samford full time since 2012 and then I was an adjunct before that for about five years, so been here for a good while.



LaToya Leary: Sounds great! Thank you! So can you tell me a little bit more about this project? Who prompted the topic? How did you guys work together? What was your role?

Dr. Jeffrey Leonard: Yeah, so it was great to get the invitation to do it. I had heard from Nicole Tilford before about doing an article on Torah and the Psalms so I was working on that one and... was delighted to get an email from John Kutsko. Normally those were just... the general broadcast emails that we get, but this one was a personal one asking if I would be involved in an undergraduate research project, and I was delighted to do it. I haven't really been able to do that before with any of my students. And there were a couple of topics available. I think the other one was the Nile. While I went on a dinner cruise once on the Nile, that's really all I know about the Nile. The other one was on Ahaz, who was one of Judea's kings. Ahaz, I knew something about, so I jumped at the chance to do it. My response was, "the only thing I need to do is figure out which student to work with". And it just so happened that in our Psalms class, our students had just turned in their papers. I was reading through their papers and there was one that really stood out and that was Emma Buckles's paper. She did a wonderful paper on Job and the Holocaust.... she just she wrote so well and did such a good job with that I said, "I think this is the person that I'd like to work with". I approached her and she was as delighted to do it as I was, so that's what got it started. It was great when we first met together about the project because, you know, this is something that ... as a scholar you do a lot of, but as an undergrad, you don't really get to do much of. We sort of started from ground zero to say "ok, so how do you go about this process". ...I just kind of said, "Ok, this is what you need to do. First, go to Bible Odyssey and start reading some articles and see...what is it that this site is all about". Then, you know, we talked about where in the Bible these passages come up that deal with the person that we were writing about and said, "Ok, so let's read through those and just kind of take some notes along the way". And I pointed her to a couple of commentaries and said, "Ok, read through those and those will tell you what the real issues...are"... From there, it was just, you know, make an outline and we will go back and forth and kind of write and rewrite and put the whole project together.

LaToya Leary: Awesome. It sounds like Emma had a pretty dominant role in this project, which sounds great!

Dr. Jeffrey Leonard: Yeah. The key was for it to be undergraduate research and for her to really go through that process. And so, especially at the beginning I walked her through and said “this is how you

Ahaz

by Emma Buckles; Jeffery Leonard

“Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel.” With these famous words, the venerable King James Version of the Gospel of Matthew heralds the birth of Christ (Matt 1:23). Long before these words were applied to Jesus, though, they were delivered by a particular prophet to a particular king whose kingdom seemed to be on the verge of collapse. The prophet was Isaiah, and the king who seemed destined to lose his kingship was Ahaz, ruler of Judah.

Who Was Ahaz?

The name Ahaz is a shortened form of names like Ahaziah and Jehoahaz, which mean “The Lord holds.” Ahaz ruled over Judah from 742–727 BCE, and accounts of his reign are preserved in 2Kgs 16, 2Chr 28, Isa 7, and various Assyrian annals. While it is difficult to reconcile all of the events they describe, we can piece together the basics of his story and some of the dilemmas he faced.

At the heart of Ahaz’s dilemma stood the menacing empire of Assyria. Under the brutal emperor Tiglath-pileser III, Assyria’s domination of its neighbors had reached crisis levels. The nation of Aram and the northern kingdom of Israel wanted to stem the tide of Tiglath-pileser’s advances by launching their own war against Assyria. When the southern King Ahaz refused to join their cause, Aram and Israel invaded Judah and threatened to replace Ahaz with a king more to their liking. The king was caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Fighting mighty Assyria was a fool’s errand, but not joining the fight might get him killed all the same.

What Was Ahaz to Do?



come out with that detailed outline”.

And then from there, ... I kind of knocked into shape some of the initial part of the article and I said, “Ok, this was just a ground zero draft.. now you go at it and say where is it unclear, where is it... good, what needs to be deleted and emphasized.” So she went through there... and it was a great process working back and forth, especially in those, you know, early stages to really get the project going.

LaToya Leary: Awesome! I just have

one more question I know I didn't shoot this question over to me before, but is this something that you would do again?... What do you see as the benefits to a project like this?

Dr. Jeffrey Leonard: I think this was a great opportunity. ...One of the best parts of it was that... teaching in an undergraduate context, my students don't always get to interact with me as a scholar. ...My teaching is good and I'm walking them through various kinds of things, but there's a little bit of a disconnect between what I'm teaching and what I might present in an SBL conference. This was a chance to say, “Ok let's ...look under the hood as it were of what's involved in researching a topic, figuring out what the issues are, figuring out how to put this together in a way that's not just a regular research paper, but ... an academic article”. So that part... was really good 'cause, I think, Emma got to see a different side of what I do and it would be great to have other students have that opportunity as well.

LaToya Leary: Yes, thank you so much for that. I think it's often the case that students think that all we do as religion or Bible professors is teach, but they kind of forget that there's a lot more to the job than teaching and grading their papers. It sounds like this project is an excellent way to ... expose students to that. I really appreciate you explaining that.

Dr. Jeffrey Leonard: Yeah... because it gives to some degree a set of training wheels so you can kind of be walked through the process... which is what all of us did. We weren't always scholars. You know, we started off turning in miserable papers that got butchered by our professors and we learned from it. This was a nice opportunity to do that same thing.... I think as... as you all give this opportunity to more students, some students will find out they really do have that gene that likes to do research and writing and they just didn't realize it. I think that would be a strong encouragement for other students to get involved in the... academic process

LaToya Leary: Yes, thank you. I agree. Thank you so much for sharing and meeting with me!