

## **Review of *The Bible in History and Literature***

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A thoughtful, balanced curriculum for teaching the Bible in public schools will include a number of voices reflecting multiple perspectives and assumptions regarding the Bible. Every point of view on the Bible relies upon assumptions, so no point of view should be excluded just because of a set of assumptions. The purpose of introducing students to the Bible is in part to demonstrate the various ways people understand the Bible and how these ways of understanding the Bible have come to shape our world. If only one point of view is presented, the student's education is impoverished, students will not be equipped to test the validity of various claims concerning the Bible that they will encounter, and the goals of public education will go unfulfilled. Hopefully, public education will promote critical thinking, which requires evaluating numerous claims and testing their self-justifications.

The curriculum titled *The Bible in History and Literature* contains some information that will further student knowledge and appreciation of the Bible. However, as a whole, it does little to describe the Bible in literature, and it presents a particular view of biblical history that may push the bounds of what is acceptable in a public-school setting. It relies upon four major assumptions that are unspoken but ever-present:

- The Bible is infallible and thus historically accurate.
- Conservative Protestant Christianity is the only true religion.
- Critical inquiry into the Bible and its backgrounds is not to be trusted.
- The United States should adopt "biblical" law.

These four assumptions drive the content of the curriculum and limit the types of scholarship that serve as its (so-called) scholarly basis. These assumptions may or may not be correct; this is not at issue here. Rather, the *exclusivity* of these assumptions hinders critical thought and development. In what follows, we explore the assumptions and the ways in which they shape this curriculum.

**Assumption: The Bible is infallible and thus historically accurate.**

Use of the phrase “the Bible says” throughout the curriculum (e.g., see 78) implies a unity of the books that comprise the Bible and ascribes to this book a single, authoritative voice.<sup>1</sup> This wording reveals an assumed doctrine of Scripture that pervades the book. The phrase “the Bible says” presents only one point of view. Public-school classrooms certainly need to learn that the point of view suggested by the phrase is but one among many perspectives. Many people from various traditions have different understandings of how the Bible “speaks.” Another point of view, for example, is quick to point out that each book within the Bible has its own “voice” that must be heard on its own grounds. Further reliance on the term “records,” as in “Exodus records that Moses went alone,” suggests a historiographic function of the text, which is just one perspective on what is narrated in Exodus.<sup>2</sup>

A desire to defend the Bible’s historiographical validity is also reflected throughout the work. For example, in the lesson for Genesis 6–11, one of the few instructions given is to “Explain that *some* faith traditions accept Genesis 11 literally as the beginnings of diverse languages and diverse peoples.”<sup>3</sup> There is no instruction to explain other points of view, including the dominant scholarly opinion that the Tower of Babel story is ancient folklore and that languages and peoples were not unified in ancient Mesopotamia. Differing points of view are at times presented, although the curriculum tends to subtly control debate through the selective admission of points of view. For example, the debate concerning the historical validity of Moses’ reception of the law gives several options, but they all reflect the same basic perspective: “Some believe God Himself wrote the commandments on stone tablets. Others believe God directed angels to write them. Still others ... that God dictated the commandments to Moses.”<sup>4</sup> This so-called “debate” is clearly conducted within the discourse of a particular faith tradition. It does not include points of view found among liberal Christianity or secular historians.

In another instance, the sheet titled “Regarding the Exodus” dates the exodus to 1446 BC [throughout the curriculum the abbreviations BC and AD are used instead of BCE and CE] by taking 1 Kings 6:1 at face value when it claims that the exodus occurred 480 years before Solomon’s fourth regnal year (the curriculum dates Solomon’s reign by the biblical text alone as well).<sup>5</sup> No alternative positions are introduced, such as opinions that the exodus did not historically occur or that the exodus did not occur as the book of Exodus presents it. This reliance on biblical narrative for factual historical references displays a naïve reliance on a particular doctrine of

Scripture, including the infallibility of the Bible. Whether or not this curriculum is true, other positions must appear in a curriculum for public schools.

Further, the curriculum makes claims that are suspiciously apologetic. For example, the introduction uses the phrase “phenomenal language” to argue that ancient writers did not believe that “the sun revolves around the earth.”<sup>6</sup> It is, in fact, clear from ancient iconography in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Syro-Palestine that seemingly all ancient Near Eastern peoples understood the sun as moving daily through the arc of the sky while the earth remained motionless.<sup>7</sup> To suggest otherwise is historically inaccurate and apparently motivated only by worries over the infallibility of the Bible.

In another place the curriculum claims that “it may be helpful to provide background analysis and chronological information located in the Ryrie Study Bible before the opening of each Bible book.”<sup>8</sup> The Ryrie Study Bible is a highly sectarian text whose “analysis” and “chronology” assume an infallible Bible. The introduction to Genesis includes the statement, “Genesis is a real-life history of individual people.”<sup>9</sup> Not only is this information incorrect according to the overwhelming majority of scholars in the Society of Biblical Literature, but this instruction leads to the promotion of the teachings of a particular sect to the exclusion of others.

With apparent naïveté, the curriculum presents the Bible as a historical document. Statements such as “Moses and King David would have written Hebrew letters vastly different than the ones used to write Hebrew today” do not introduce the students to the scholarly and intellectual discussion concerning the existence of an historical King David.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the statement uses the modal verb “would” to smuggle in the sectarian assumption that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. Such an assumption derives from the desire to read the Bible as the inspired and infallible words of God dictated to humans. Similarly, a sectarian book tellingly titled *Signature of God* is quoted to defend Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch on the grounds that writing had been invented before the alleged time of a historical Moses.<sup>11</sup> Such an argument proves nothing and serves only to imply that Moses authored significant parts of the Bible. In fact, most scholars claim that the first five books of the Bible appear to have undergone a lengthy process of editing, addition, and subtraction even into the Greco-Roman era. This view, however, is not even suggested in the curriculum.

Furthermore, the curriculum makes claims that are incorrect. The curriculum claims: “Scholars suggest that King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem around 605 BC [*sic*].”<sup>12</sup> The deportation and destruction of the temple to which the curriculum refers occurred in 587 or 586 BCE. Comparative textual evidence leaves little room for doubt that this figure is inaccurate. Another section claims: “Writing was not developed until approxi-

mately 2,000 BC [*sic*], the time that coincides with the biblical account of Abraham.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, writing arose in the late fourth millennium BCE. According to the curriculum, “from the moment the Samaritans moved into the center of Israel, they found themselves in opposition to the Jewish people (who returned from the Babylonian captivity).”<sup>14</sup> Judahites lived in Israel even during the time of “Babylonian captivity,” and Samaritans were likely present before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 587 BCE.

**Assumption: Conservative Protestant Christianity is the only true religion.**

The section discussing “Information about Ur” reveals further sectarian impulses. Ancient Sumerians are described as “a people who were, from the biblical standpoint, idol worshipers (it was the ancient seat of lunar worship).”<sup>15</sup> This remark is not clarified by a more nuanced portrayal of the complicated world of ancient Mesopotamian religion; it describes an ancient people with what amounts to a derogatory term used mainly in conservative Christian circles. Instead, the curriculum should demonstrate a willingness to approach every religion with sensitivity and a desire to move beyond blanket dismissals of other faiths. A comparative approach to the religion of ancient Israel is in fact a rich field with many informative parallels between Israel’s conception of God and those of its neighbors. We understand the text much better when we suspend judgment about other religions. This does not mean all who study the text must become religious synergists, but it does mean that all who study the text must take the history of the ancient Near East seriously, including how other cultures understood their gods.

In another instance, a chart introducing the letters of the ancient Hebrew alphabet ends with the letter *taw*, which in one alphabet resembles a cross. Next to the letter, one sees a small picture of Jesus on the cross, surely meant to introduce a connection between the Hebrew alphabet and the “prophetic truths” relating to the life of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>16</sup> Why is Jesus on a chart of the Hebrew alphabet? The tacit assumption is that Christianity has fulfilled and superseded Judaism. Although this is a standard view of some Christian groups, it should not be subtly introduced in picture form without any accompanying text to explain this strange appearance or an opposing point of view.

Another example of this thought can be seen in the activity suggestions for the book of Isaiah, in which students are supposed to listen to the portions of Handel’s “Messiah” that relate to Isaiah. Handel’s work is magnificent and beautiful, but it is also an explicitly Christian reading of Isaiah. The curriculum gives no guidance for the teacher on how to lead a discuss-

sion concerning Christian interpretation of Jewish Scriptures. This is a difficult topic, but the lack of concern on the part of the authors of the curriculum suggests their desire to have students read Isaiah as Christian Scripture fulfilled by Jesus. Without guidance and balance, such an approach favors the view of a particular perspective. Suggestions that the Dead Sea Scrolls might “support belief in the divinity of Jesus” are obviously made in support of a conservative Christian theology.<sup>17</sup> Yet how could ancient documents ever support or deny such a statement of contemporary faith? Even if these documents speak of Jesus, does that imply that these documents are authoritative? The assumption is that they are authoritative, but no alternative position is introduced. Furthermore, the authors demonstrate basic unfamiliarity with Judaism; the unit on the Dead Sea Scrolls (some from centuries before Jesus) “is a good place” to study the Mishnah and Talmud (centuries after the life of Jesus).<sup>18</sup> Judaism is lumped into one session, but Christian interpretation is given space throughout the curriculum. Such a one-sided presentation of the Christian Bible—of which far more than one-half is the product of Jewish religion and culture—is not respectful of the text, of history, or of Jewish students in the classrooms.

The section covering the history of the Bible’s translation is skewed heavily toward Protestant translations of the Bible into English. For example, William Tyndale is called “the greatest translator of Scripture into English who ever lived.”<sup>19</sup> There is no footnote for this odd attribution, which would likely apply only to Protestant Christians, not even Roman Catholics. “Scripture,” here, is apparently functioning as a synonym for the Bible, which presents its own problems for those of different faiths. The section ends with a discussion of the King James Bible, which is apparently taken to be the fulfillment of all Bible translation. No mention is made of Jewish translations after the early centuries CE, and the history of the Bible in America is restricted to Christian translations. The curriculum even claims the following: “Once the King James version was embraced, it held the hearts and souls of the faithful throughout the English-speaking world without challenge.... [Tyndale’s foundational work for the KJV] has never been excelled by subsequent translators, whether working alone or in committee.”<sup>20</sup> The “faithful” are described as using the KJV; this puts Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, not to mention Jews and people of any other faith, outside the category of “faithful”! Such a statement is only meant to advocate a sectarian position, since many traditions have never used the KJV.

Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Orthodox Christians are further marginalized by the discussion of the “Apocrypha.”<sup>21</sup> According to the curriculum, Christians have “typically paid little heed” to the books excised by the Puritans, and “some faith traditions disregard these books as reliable

religious texts.”<sup>22</sup> The former unfounded apologetic statement reflects the theological position of a group who discounts these texts as Scripture, while the latter statement only serves to denigrate what are for many “reliable religious texts.”

The introduction to biblical interpretation teaches students to use a “literal method” of reading the Bible without reference to alternate views. This is not presented alongside Jewish (or any other) non-“literal” methods of reading of the Bible, which include “midrash.” The authors do caution that “sometimes it is difficult to know whether an account in the Bible is simply a historical account, or whether it is intended to convey a deeper meaning.”<sup>23</sup> However, the assumption that anything written in the ancient world is “simply an historical account” is entirely anachronistic. Moreover, the two options presented are “history” or “deeper meaning,” suggesting a reading from the location of a particular faith tradition. What about reading the Bible as literature or as a collection of ancient folktales and poetry?

Further, the textbook is clearly biased in favor of a Protestant Christian understanding of Jesus’ life and death. Thus, a quotation from Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian, is included and presented as historically accurate, as it appears to attest to Jesus’ miracles and resurrection.<sup>24</sup> There is no discussion in the curriculum of the scholarly opinions that the quotation has been edited by Christians at a subsequent period to reflect a theological statement of Jesus’ divinity.

Furthermore, the section on Jesus’ death reveals a bizarre fascination with the torture of crucifixion. The section describing the “pain of crucifixion” includes a gory discussion of “ribbons of flesh” and “crushed or severed” nerves and as such, is completely inappropriate, entirely unnecessary, and a misuse of valuable space that could be given to discussing the various depictions of Jesus’ death in the Gospels.<sup>25</sup> Instead, Jesus’ death is presented as an amalgamation of all four Gospels, harmonized in such a way that it presents the text with no contradictions. An academically rigorous approach would present the individual texts and give numerous reasons for their portrayals. As such, the curriculum skews the presentation toward a particular Christian interpretation of the Gospels, suggesting implicitly that other ways of reading the Bible are not worthy of interest.

Finally, the curriculum suggests studying the books of Psalms and Proverbs throughout the rest of the year, interspersed with other sections of the curriculum. This practice is derived from devotional contexts and amounts to an in-class devotion.<sup>26</sup> While the Psalms and Proverbs are fascinating and have given life to the worship of many communities over thousands of years, their reading apart from the context of the scholarly academic study impoverishes the reading. Imagine if teachers opened up every math class with an unexplained reading from the Qur’an! Likewise, the classroom

exercise to “take Miriam’s song in Exodus 15 and create a tune and sing it with a guitar” sounds suspiciously like introducing elements of contemporary Christian worship into the classroom.<sup>27</sup> Such devotional contexts are meant to further the evangelization of children by one particular sect.

**Assumption: Critical inquiry into the Bible and its backgrounds is not to be trusted.**

Statements such as “Most biblical scholars accept that the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah was the author of the book of Lamentations” are simply not accurate and reflect a lack of familiarity with scholarship or a distortion of the scholarly tradition.<sup>28</sup> If the authors are unfamiliar with the scholarship, why are they writing a textbook? And if they are misrepresenting about scholarship, should anyone buy their textbook?

The sources used are of sectarian origin or of dubious quality, sometimes both. The curriculum shows either a reluctance to interact with mainstream scholarship or a lack of scholarly input. For example, a section titled “Pre-Babylonian Hebrew” is composed of one block-quote from a book entitled *Hebrew Word Pictures: How Does the Hebrew Alphabet Reveal Prophetic Truths*. By the title alone, one may see the emphasis on revealing prophetic truths, which is commonly associated with a more conservative theology. A nonsectarian approach would certainly reference an altogether different source for discussing the Hebrew alphabet. In all, the scholars cited by the authors are consistently of a single point of view. This bias is clear in the above treatments of the material.

The consistent omission of the voice of academic scholarship should raise a significant question: Are the authors of the curriculum subject-matter experts? This would be required of any curriculum in English or history or math. No authors are listed, and thus, any answer is speculation. However, their consistent use of sectarian scholars and their failure to reference many well-known scholarly texts suggests a basic lack of awareness of many points of view.

**Assumption: The United States should adopt “biblical” law.**

The illustrations on the cover pages to the book’s different units are pieces of one large picture comprised of an American flag, a copy of the United States Constitution, and a desk. These pictures are not explained, but their function is clear: this textbook really wants to talk about how to make the United States a Christian nation that has laws based on a fundamentalist Christian reading of ancient texts.

Thus, Unit 6, ostensibly concerned with “Hebrew Law,” opens with two quotes, one from James Madison, and the other from John Quincy Adams. This odd juxtaposition of ancient texts and modern politicians is not explained, but the underlying assumption is clear. One of the quotes claims that “we [the United States?] have staked the whole future of American civilization . . . upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves . . . according to the Ten Commandments.”<sup>29</sup> This quote is followed by a section called “The Historical Influence of the Hebrew Laws” in which no space is given to a discussion of any particular laws.<sup>30</sup> Instead, this section discusses American politicians and their comments concerning religion. In reality, this section subtly argues that the United States was, is, and must continue to be a Christian nation and suggests that the entire country should be run according to “Mosaic law.”<sup>31</sup> For many reasons, such a suggestion is not appropriate and has no place in the public classroom. The curriculum may present religious opinions but may not endorse them. As the curriculum does not present other opinions on the topic of “Mosaic” law as the basis for a modern legal code, the presentation amounts to a tacit endorsement. The curriculum could present another view, as well, namely, that the United States must allow for religious freedoms not granted by the laws in the Pentateuch.

Furthermore, the section entitled “The Bible in History” begins with the American political reception of biblical texts.<sup>32</sup> The curriculum thus ignores over two thousand years of biblical interpretation and focuses only on matters of Christian political interest. Here, the political goals of the curriculum are transparent and inappropriate.

Instead of leading students to discover the varied history of the interpretation of the Bible, in which billions of people have understood biblical texts in diverse ways, the curriculum presents a false unity of interpretation centered on the government of the United States. Jewish, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and secular Bible interpretation are, for the most part, ignored. A proper section on “The Bible in History” should begin with the Greco-Roman era and introduce the various streams of interpreters in their different contexts, following the traditions until the modern era, at which point critical scholarship began to exercise enormous influence. Yet this narrative is ignored altogether, and with this, the political focus of the authors becomes clear. Yes, the Bible has exerted a tremendous influence on American politics, but its influence is broad, representing many different faith traditions and interpretive choices.

In summary, this curriculum is in clear violation of basic educational practices, lacks intellectual integrity, and does not use first amendment standards for religion textbooks in public schools.

*Notes*

- <sup>1</sup> *The Bible in History and Literature*, e.g., see 78.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.
- <sup>7</sup> See O. Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, Ch. 1.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Bible in History and Literature*, 62.
- <sup>9</sup> C. Ryrie, ed., *Ryrie Study Bible* (Moody: 1995), 1.
- <sup>10</sup> *The Bible in History and Literature*, 53.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-23.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.
- <sup>29</sup> Ostensibly quoted from James Madison, no source given, 97.
- <sup>30</sup> *The Bible in History and Literature*, 100-101.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.