Teagle Collegium on Inquiry in Action
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Inquiry Portfolio for an Intermediate Biblical Hebrew Course fall 2008 & spring 2009
Course Portfolio Abstract

This course portfolio reflects the major teaching and learning trajectories for me and my students during two semesters of Intermediate Biblical Hebrew. These trajectories include my and the students’ major course aims, implementations of these aims in the form of teaching strategies, assessments of these strategies, and reflections on the process as a whole. I primarily wanted the students to understand that the Bible is always mediated by people in multiple and contradictory ways rather than being an external authority that asserts its will. I find this to be a continually challenging task since many societies employ the Bible as God’s instruction to humanity. Further, even when verses do not command or judge, but rather, describe events or people, they assume an authoritative “wise” tone, which, in my experience, often limits the kinds of questions and challenges readers pose. To help the students realize that the Bible is always read in multiple and often conflicting ways, I shifted the course from its traditional text-centered approach to a reader-centered one. Instead of approaching the Bible by asking: “What does the text say?” I continually asked the students: “What are your readings of this text?” To further understand that the Bible is a human-constructed book, we also explored the reading lenses of Bible scholars to appreciate their different assumptions about the Bible’s writers, redactors, and audiences. I initially planned to extend this reader-centered approach so that the students could reflect on how their different readings result in different ways of applying the texts in their lives. I thought we would discuss if and how the Bible’s content might preclude and restrict other possible interpretations, identifications, and actions. However, while we delved into multiple interpretations of the texts at hand, we only touched upon if and how these different readings applied in their lives. During much of this course, it seemed to me that understanding how the Bible informs identification or action required a level of reflection outside of the pedagogical principles and student expectations of Biblical Hebrew. I learned toward the end of the final semester that structured reflection such as narrative writing, drawing, and small group discussions could link the ways of understanding Biblical content to the ramifications these understandings have in the students’ lives.

Course Background and Fall Objectives

Intermediate Biblical Hebrew is a second year language course, which fulfills a language requirement for both undergraduate and graduate students. This was my first time teaching this course. To prepare, I sought to understand how the course was taught in the past so that I knew departmental and student expectations. I learned that the course primarily entailed employing grammatical rules to translate verses. The previous Biblical Hebrew teacher and the director of the Jewish Studies Program encouraged me to provide a grammar review because they experienced students to forget some or much what they learned in Beginning Biblical Hebrew over the summer. However, they did not advise following a grammar text as had been done in the beginners’ course. Rather, they suggested using a grammar text as a reference and having the rules emerge through discussions of
the text itself. They also advised that the students needed experience reading different kinds of Biblical texts such as narratives, poetry, and legal portions. Although they offered these general principles, I had the flexibility to structure the course as I saw fit.

My own goals for the course were different from reinforcing grammar skills or providing the students with experience reading more Biblical texts. As an anthropology PhD student, I am researching how religious-text study constructs gendered identity and action. Instead of studying the Bible to understand what “it” has to say, I am interested in how Bible study constructs social life. I hoped to use this lens in the class by asking if and how the students’ different Bible interpretations constructed their identities and actions.

Further, grammar-based pedagogy was not how I learned the Hebrew Bible. I attained my own knowledge of Biblical Hebrew in primary and secondary Orthodox Jewish schools, as well as in adult Modern Orthodox settings where I read the Hebrew, translated it, looked at various rabbinic and academic commentaries, and discussed nearly the entire Bible one verse at a time. While I learned the rules of grammar, they did not structure any of the numerous courses I took. Now, in contrast to my previous experience as a Bible learner and to my own anthropological aims, grammar proficiency was the pedagogical aim of academic Biblical Hebrew instruction. I, therefore, reflected upon how my own knowledge would impact my teaching as well as integrated my anthropological goals with course expectations. I worried that focusing on Biblical grammar would bring my and the students’ attention to memorizing static principles rather than the multiple ways of reading and applying these texts.

I retained the grammar foundation of the course as I learned that this was not negotiable from a disciplinary perspective. I figured that grammar is inherently a unifying system. It keeps everyone on the same page. But…there are ambiguities even within this system. I thought we could use this scholar-created system to gain entry into the discipline of academic Hebrew. We would show how the same Hebrew word-root could have multiple meanings, emphasizing the choices and multiple voices that the writers and readers of the Bible engage. We would also entertain that there were communities that ignore the rules of grammar.

My fall course objectives included the following:

**By the end of the semester, you will be able to read Biblical words, phrases, verses, and whole sections in different and even conflicting ways within the limits of Biblical grammatical rules and with the use of a dictionary. In this class, we will strengthen your grasp of Biblical Hebrew by preparing, reading, and discussing different styles of Biblical texts: narrative, legal, and poetic. By cultivating your knowledge of grammar you will see how some words and passages have more than one meaning, are ambiguous, have strange or surprising turns of phrase, and often lack vital information for understanding the narrative, legal, or poetic passage. You will begin to appreciate how the Bible can be and is**
interpreted in a variety of ways. You will also begin to make connections between different textual readings and communal ideological platforms or concerns. This ability will allow you to speak with and understand different Bible reading communities.

The Fall Semester: Falling Away from My Original Aims

The Students

There were six students in the fall course. Five also took the spring course and another student enrolled for spring, which meant there were six students for fall and spring. In the fall, two students were juniors, two were seniors, and two were graduate students. In the spring, one senior left and a graduate student took his place.

During the first class, I asked the students to write down their personal course goals. I found their aims to express a single idea, although some offered different reasons for having this aim. They each wanted to learn “to understand the Bible in Hebrew.” Three students offered additional reasons. Two students wrote that they wanted to understand the Bible in the “original way it was written.” Another explained that he wanted to understand the “ancient context in which the Bible was written.” As the fall course developed, I learned that one student wanted to become an academic Bible scholar. He found the Bible’s themes “cool.” Another felt motivated to understand the Hebrew Bible because she found the stories “powerful and beautiful.” She also felt committed to her Christian religious life, which for her meant becoming knowledgeable of the Bible in Hebrew. I also learned during the fall semester that the sixth student wanted to understand the Bible primarily as an influential piece of literature.

After reading the student’s initial aims, I discussed how the Bible in the form that we have it now changed over time. I wanted to challenge the notion of an “original” text from a single source. I provided sources for those who wanted to study more about how the Hebrew Bible was written and transmitted. I realized that since all wanted to understand the Bible from “its own” vantage point, which assumed a definitive authoritative read or readings, I needed to continually emphasize that there was no right way to read the Bible. We discussed how reading is an inherently human activity, and as all human activity is filtered though a perceptual lens.

A Typical Class

In order to frame this approach we discussed the idea of a lens and what it meant to make one’s lens apparent. The idea of lens, and identifying lenses, framed each of our classes.

Typical classes in the fall semester included the students’ listening to one another read the verses in Hebrew, translate them into English, and further explain how they came up with the translations
they did. I then would ask each student to summarize what they thought was the main idea to emphasize the point that translation means interpretation. We would then discuss the different meanings the other students, who were not reading at the time, came up with. This activity at times showed how different interpretations could be derived from the same verses, even when students understood the grammar in the same way.

During the course, half of the students requested moving ahead to address more texts rather than continue with interpretive discussions. I responded to these requests by moving through the texts more quickly, although this was a constant challenge for me as I wanted to work on application. We covered the entire books of Jonah and Ruth among other portions of books in Genesis, Leviticus, Judges, and Samuel. I found in the fall semester that most of the students had different goals than I did. They were interested in learning the language and studying more and more texts. This created a tension between my aims and theirs.

**The Fall: Implementation I: The Grammar Challenge**

In the fall, I discovered that the students had different grasps of Biblical grammar. Some knew the rules better than I did while others needed more extensive grammar review to translate and interpret the verses. I aimed for the preparation assignment to allow those who needed more review to do so before each class. I also instructed them to work in pairs so that they could learn from one another and teach one another. I thought that making the preparations a major portion of the grade would encourage students to take the time to prepare well. By collecting their preparations I would align their assessments with what I expected them to learn.

The preparation assignment went as follows:

1) **Class Preparation and Participation** (40% of the grade)

Buy a notebook or journal that will serve as your grammar analysis journal for each class preparation. Determine the time and a place to meet up with your study partner and set this time for the rest of the semester if possible. I will collect these notebooks 5 times during the semester and check them. I will collect them on Monday and return them that Wednesday each time except the 5th time. For Wednesday’s preparation when you do not have your notebooks, you can write on a loose sheet of paper and staple it to them when I return them, or use any other method to get all the notes in one place.

Your notes should consist of three elements:

a) **Verb analysis**

Verb analysis should include the root/shoresh, form/perfect-imperfect-participle, stem/binyan, person, gender, number, and special features.
Parse the verbs that have a less common stem or require analysis beyond a typical Qal form. For example, parse all Pu'al, Hof'al, Hit'pael, and Nif'al verbs. Also parse geminates.

You should refer to your grammar book and explain rules that you had to look up in your notebooks. Last, you should cite the page numbers from the BDB (Biblical Hebrew dictionary) of words that you looked up.

b) **Headings describing major changes in story content**

c) **Four to five questions that come up for you in preparation**

**Assessment**

For those who worked on their preparations, they successfully honed their grammar skills and entered the world of textual interpretive difference, problems, and ambiguity. The headings allowed all of us to see how the students interpreted the verses differently, if they did. The questions often led to discussions about how one could read the text from a number of vantage points and through different lenses. For example, when we studied the book of Ruth, one student wondered whether Boaz was sexually interested in Ruth from the moment he saw her or whether he acted out of sympathy, wishing to help Naomi and Ruth out of their impoverished state. We discussed how each interpretation could be supported by different readings of the text and how some students felt more inclined toward one reading that than the other. We also discussed whether there could be other options. Could Boaz have both experiences and how would the verses be read to convey these two experiences? We named the lenses of analysis: patriarchy, power, gender, and reverence came to their minds. The students kept their notebooks for their own documentation and continual reflection.

**Reflection**

Four of six students thought the notebook assignment was helpful in gaining grammar knowledge and becoming more proficient textual interpreters. One said that he “would now have a resource to use again.” Another said that “it was difficult and took a lot of time to do.”

I encouraged those students who did not prepare adequately in that they did not address many of the verses, write headings, or write questions--- to study together (as they had not kept up with their study partners). I also suggested that they look at models of completed thoughtful work. I wonder now if meeting in pairs was something I should have made mandatory, as those who met in pairs did better than those who did not. At the time, I decided that I could not police this and did not know how to ensure that students would meet without making them culpable in some way. I felt negatively toward this approach because I thought that it would be exerting too much control over students’ time and individual learning approaches.
Now I think that making them responsible for a productive practice is ultimately helpful to them as was evidenced by the great work the students did when working in pairs. At the end of the fall semester, after numerous reminders, the students all significantly improved in their notebook preparation assignments; they addressed all three requirements and worked through the verses more extensively and thoughtfully.

**Other Assessments**

During the fall, I used different assessment activities to evaluate where the students were in their learning and to further draw them into debate and discussion and realization of interpretive lens. I chose assessments from the book *Classroom Assessment Techniques* by Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross. I aimed for the “One sentence summary” and “The muddiest point” to allow students to see how their understandings and problems differed from one another and how their common questions could help one another read with greater nuance. We would often engage in lively debate, but I also found that two or three students dominated the conversations.

When only two or three students sharing their ideas, I would ask if they all could provide me with feedback in writing to improve the class dynamic and discussion so that everyone felt motivated to participate. I asked for this kind of feedback three times during the fall semester. Often the students wrote that they wanted to move more quickly through the material. Others said that the preparation was too intense and at times they had not prepared enough (these were the same students who refused to meet in pairs). I also thought that there were certain instances when students were simply less inclined to share their thoughts because they did have ideas to share when I asked them directly.

**Implementation II: Small Group Discussion**

I decided to break the already small class down into smaller groups to work on a particular question or to discuss a passage. After a certain amount of time, I asked each of the students to bring their findings up to the whole group.

In smaller groups, the students responded to questions such as: What do you think the major themes of the story are and why do you think so? They drew interpretations pictorially on the board and read passages they had not seen before to show them whether they could understand Biblical Hebrew as they did English—without the aid of a dictionary. After the small group assignments, the students would reflect as an entire group about what they discussed. These smaller group activities worked better in getting everyone’s perspective heard.
I was never certain why individuals were silent when they were at any given time as I did not ask this question directly. I decided that if the reasons were lack of preparation, desire to move forward, or shyness, small groups discussions would help ----and they did. In the future, however, I would experiment with asking this question directly and asking the students to respond in writing so that I could collaborate with them to create interventions that would help them speak freely in group contexts without first discussing their ideas in smaller groups--or in writing. I would also retain the practice of working in small groups because it provided students time to work though ideas and find their voices in the class. I wonder, however, if and how small group activity would transfer to other contexts when small group discussions are not possible.

**Fall Implementation III: Making the Connection between Different Interpretations and Communal Ideologies**

**A Failed Final Project**

As the students progressed in their grasp of Biblical grammar, reading, and understandings of interpretive difference, I wanted them to direct their knowledge in the final project to connect interpretation and ideology.

I assigned the following final exegetical project to address this aim:

**Final Exegetical Project (40% of grade)**

The goal of this paper will be to describe, analyze, and compare how different communities interpret biblical texts. This will require you to analyze a text we have not dealt with in class.

For this paper, you will

- Listen to a sermon of any kind, in person or from a media source (web/radio/television/film/book/transcribed political speech) that focuses on a Biblical passage.

- Explain how the particular interpreter understood the passage and how he/she interpreted the words and phrases.

- Interview two other people who listened to the sermon and ask them what they understood the passage of the bible to mean. In addition, ask them what messages they took away from the sermon; did they understand the passage differently than the speaker and if so how did that affect what they took away from the speech? What did the sermon teach them or do for them?
• You will analyze the passage on your own in the context of at least 10 verses (even if the sermonizer does not use all these verses) using the grammar rules we practiced in class. How do you understand the passage based upon this analysis?

• Research two commentaries on this same passage; how do they interpret the verses? How did they come to their interpretations?

• Summarize the similarities and differences you found in the ways this passage was interpreted by (1) sermonizer (2) two audience participants (3) you (4) two commentaries.

• Reflect upon what you think the different ideologies that these interpretations express.

I thought that by listening to one another’s interpretations they could now make connections between interpretation and ideology, world view, or lens. We extended the discussion of lens to ideology in that ideology expressed a world view where lens was more easily gained and shed, and the students seemed to understand as they nodded and some offered examples. I did not do any assessments to determine and solidify their understanding.

Assessment

After reading the students’ papers, I learned four major lessons.

1) I did not address ideology through an activity or assessment, and the students did not completely understand what I meant. Further, making connections between interpretation and ideology is not as straightforward as I explained; these kinds of connections are complex and require more extensive interviewing and analysis than I instructed for the paper.

2) While the students saw how they interpreted the texts differently from one another, they never made connections between one another’s interpretations and ideologies, a skill they required to fulfill this assignment. When one student did express how their ideas connected to lens or ideology, they presented a stereotype rather than an understanding. Again, this demonstrated the difficulties in making connections between ideas and ideology/lens.

3) This assignment deviated from my original goal of getting the students to primarily reflect upon their own lenses, ideologies, and practices. Although this assignment aligned with the course goal, I realized that the course goal was not my initial aim for the class.

4) To understand the idea of lens and ideology, students needed to read about them directly and apply them to Bible.

Reflection
I realized that I became uncomfortable asking the students to reflect upon their individual lives. The discipline of Biblical Hebrew seemed to make no room for individual reflection so I instructed the students to reflect on others, rather than themselves. After reading their write ups of their interviews, which were rambling and under analyzed or seeing how they ignored the interviews completely in their papers, I realized that they did not have the tools to interpret different interpretations—they distinguished different but could not analyze how they differed and why these differences were significant.

The students reported that they did not know what to do with the interviews they performed. They also did not know how to analyze sermons. While we spent time in class working on interview questions, we did not do this in writing and we did not respond to one another’s interview questions. One student who wrote one of the more coherent papers reported that he thought his paper was “all over the place.” At the close of the fall semester, four students expressed that they preferred to engage academic Biblical scholarship as they wanted access to this disciplinary world. Two students expressed that they wanted to gain religious meaning for themselves through our Bible study and therefore were mainly interested in learning Hebrew language. I decided to make my aims completely learner centered and follow their lead.

### Spring: A New Approach

In the Inquiry in Action Consortium discussions I had become interested in the Learner-Centered Approach and ways to apply this theory to class goals and assessments. The idea that students bring their own ideas about the course into the classroom seemed obvious. That these ideas could be acknowledged, developed, and challenged so that students have a rich meaningful learning experience—was less obvious. I became focused on understanding how to develop their knowledge to meet their personal aims. In the process of focusing on the students goals, however, I ignored my own expertise and aims.

For example, in my initial attempt to make my course more learner-centered I asked the students to send me their new semester goals as well as the texts they wanted to study. Prior to and in the beginning of the spring, four of six students sent me their text choices. These were the same students that wanted to gain access to academic Biblical Hebrew. One student provided academic books and articles that approached the Bible from historical, literary, and feminist perspectives.

I revamped my course spring objective, reinforcing this objective throughout the semester by giving examples of possible final paper topics.

**By the end of the semester, you will be able to write a well-researched analytical paper on portions of the Hebrew Bible from a grammatical, literary, feminist, or historical perspective or combination of perspectives.**
I thought this goal would allow those interested in academic Bible scholarship to develop their analytic skills, while also appreciating how academics debate and differ on how to read the Bible. Academic Bible scholars also discuss their lenses and we could then appreciate how different lenses and assumptions resulted in different readings. I arranged the articles so that the students would read them after dealing with a portion of the text that the articles discussed. I thought that this would allow the students to first deal with the text on their own terms. Further, analyzing the texts first would enable them to appreciate the often complicated academic treatment better.

**Spring Implementation I: Students Present the Texts**

I required the students to lead the class discussions of the texts. In leading the discussions, I instructed them to prepare the texts from a grammatical perspective, as well as, prepare a frame (s) or lens (s) for discussing the texts. These discussions were thought provoking, however, I assumed too much of a directive role.

**Assessment**

Students framed discussions using the themes of: text dating, imagery, symbolism, word-play, different accounts of creation, and polytheism. However, most of the students used grammatical lenses to interpret the verses. Their presentations told me that four of the six students were most comfortable dealing with the text from a grammatical perspective. The grammar was their springboard for different readings but they did not develop these readings further or analyze them. I hoped that the academic articles would extend their perspectives further and model what analysis meant.

The following are some examples of the student’s presentations (link to [Grammatical Presentations](#)).

**Reflection**

During these presentations, I planned to participate in the discussions as I would a student in a graduate seminar. While one student said the presentations were “fun” three others expressed that they were “stressful.” The other two studnets thought the presentations helped them understand the material better. I offered support by talking with them about possible ways of leading discussions and directing when the student seemed at a loss. The format, however, continued to be a problem.

Handing over the job of facilitating and managing discussion to the students created a different kind of tension than existed in the fall. In the fall, I was concerned that everyone voice their ideas. This semester, I added to this problem with the concern that there be a focused discussion.
In retrospect, I could have stepped back more to offer the students more discussion space and to observe where the discussions would go without my continual participation—even if this meant some awkward long silences or frustrations. I would then have a better idea of what exactly they could do easily and what they had trouble with.

**Spring Implementation II: Presenting the Articles**

The students were also responsible for presenting the academic article. For these presentations, I asked them to summarize the articles main points, to point out the author's lens and method in approaching the texts, and to evaluate the article.

I asked the entire class to respond to the article prior to class. I created an online forum for the students to post their responses. An assignment for article responses from Heidi Elmendorf in her talk “Examining the Value of Social Pedagogies: A Paradigm for Deepening Disciplinary Engagement among Undergraduate Students” was useful in that it incorporated not only different interpretations but named the roles or positions of these interpretations (Lecture, Indiana University, January 23, 2009). Naming the interpretive stance would provide another way of discussing interpretive lens.

The assignment read as follows:

*We will talk about the reading material and so you must have read it to participate...So to encourage and reward your best intentions.*

*You are required to go online to oncourse under Folders and comment on the reading a day prior to the class the readings will be discussed. A significant portion of your participation grade will depend on the regularity and quality of your writings and participation.*

*Assign yourself one of the following five roles in your first paragraph of commentary: Summarizer, Confused One, Criticizer, Connector, or Realist. Then in the second paragraph extend the ideas of the author into new areas with questions or comments from your own.*

*The on-line folders are your place to get ideas flowing with one another. Therefore, if you are not the first person to submit, please read the previous commentaries before you write and refer back to them when appropriate. I'll then hand out the comments in class for further discussion on them.*

The following is an example of the students’ response to excerpts from the book *In the Wake of the Goddess* by Tikva Freymer Kensky. This article dealt with polytheism in ancient Israelite culture as reflected in the Bible using a gendered or feminist analysis. Asherah is the name of a Goddess worshipped in ancient polytheistic Canaan.
Mark Smith—whose book we read sections of earlier—and Tikva Freymer-Kensky interpret Genesis 49:25 in different ways. Smith adduces Genesis 49:25 as the only non-polemical, biblical evidence for Asherah as an independent deity in the period of the Judges. The reference to "breasts-and-womb," in his opinion, is epithet of Asherah. Freymer-Kensky, by contrast, uses the verse as evidence that YHWH arrogated fertility power—originally the preserve of goddesses—over the course of the monotheistic revolution. These arguments are incompatible. Smith argues for the existence of Asherah as a separate entity, distinct from YHWH, while Freymer-Kensky argues that YHWH “absorbed” Asherah and her functions, along with the other goddesses.

It is instructive to compare how these scholars read the Hebrew to support their arguments. Smith translates verse 25 as, “By El, your Father, who helps you, By Shaddai who blesses you, with blessings of Heavens, from above, The blessings of the Deep, crouched below, The blessings of Breasts-and-Womb.” Freymer-Kensky, on the other hand, translates, “The God of your father who helps you, Shaddai who blesses you, with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that crouches below, blessings of breast and womb.” Trivialities aside, the only distinction between these translation is the capitalization of certain phrases, including “breasts and womb,” which invites the question: did opinion influence translation or vice-versa?

Assessment
This responder understands how different interpreters may arrive at their interpretations. He is also able to analyze whether these interpretations are compatible or mutually exclusive. He compares their methods and comes to an insightful conclusion that they are similar. He then questions the other factors that may have led them to different conclusions. While this response shows facility with the idea of lens and interpretive ramifications of different lenses, the student did not address the authors’ stated lenses, which were feminist-historical and literary-historical, in his analysis. The next step for him would be to include an analysis of these lenses into his comparison.

I found Freymer-Krensky's take on the Biblical opinion of women, seen in chapter 11, to be very interesting. Freymer-Kensky takes a different approach to the portrayal of the women in the Bible than would be expected. She argues that "There is nothing distinctively 'female' about the way that women are portrayed in the Bible" (120). While she does not deny that the relationship between men and women was hierarchical, she does say that in the Biblical conception of gender, "the desires and actions of men and women are similar" (121). She distinguishes three societal roles of Biblical women, namely mothers, wives, and (less often) daughters and sisters (Ibid).

While I think that this is a very interesting idea, what gave me pause was Freymer-Krensky's idea that the best thing a Biblical woman could do was continue the patrilineal line. Those who acted in accordance with those norms, even if their actions violated societal norms, were praised rather than
condemned (124). I do not quite agree with her argument that Ruth and Tamar are praised because of their actions. In fact, I think the Biblical portrayal of Tamar is pretty negative. She is called a whore multiple times, and is almost burned for her adultery, but only escapes by dint of her planning and forethought (Gen 38:24-26). The only argument that can be made for her redemption is that she is related to David. This seems quite in contrast to Freymer-Krensky’s portrayal of marriage as “harmonious” and involving “love” (122). Ruth, too, is praised for her loyalty to her mother-in-law, not her position as increasing Boaz’s property nor her love for either her old or new husband. Incidentally, Ruth provides a counterexample to Freymer-Krensky’s point that Biblical women do not display female solidarity (127).

Assessment

This responder summarizes one of the author’s main points and challenges this reading by providing textual examples of (1) how women are treated differently and (2) how they do have unique relationships with other women. The next step would be to further interrogate the author’s opinions about these other texts and to investigate how the student’s opinion compares to the author’s opinion as well as how the student’s understanding of feminism compares with the author’s understanding of feminism.

Reflection

In our class discussion we reviewed Freymer Kensky’s main points and identified her lens. We discussed the ideas and problems the Connector and Realist wrote about in their responses. I also added my own critique of Kensky to the mix. Two other students summarized the main arguments differently. Notably, four out of six students responded to this article. Two students who struggled with finding meaning in the academic articles often did not respond to them. One of the students explained that he did not find the academic articles useful as they contradicted his understanding of the Bible. I encouraged him to specify how they contradicted his interpretations in the responses, but he would continue not to respond. In retrospect, I could have met with him individually and discussed his struggles or created an activity for the class so that they could work through how academic writing may or may not challenge faith or why they may be useful to people of faith. The other student did not find the articles interesting or useful. While we discussed why these articles are useful, this did not seem to engage the two students to find meaning in them. They mostly wanted to learn the Hebrew language so that they could use the text in their religious contexts and lives.

It is a great irony that while I structured the spring semester for the students interested in the academic treatment of the Bible, the other two students were more involved with how the Bible applied in their lives, which was my initial aim!
During the last third of the semester I found that I needed more guidance with the class. The students who had difficulty speaking in the fall were virtually silent in the spring and I was not enjoying my role as an overseer of class discussion. The two students that viewed the Bible from specific religious lenses also seemed absent from class discussion looking glazed and bored. The class brooded and ploughed along. Something needed to change.

**The Teagle Consortium---Another Shift**

The Teagle Inquiry in Action team helped me reflect on these problems and come up with some solutions. During our group discussions and in meetings with Katie Kearns, I realized that I completely submerged my own goals to please the most engaged students, which did not serve the class as a whole or motivate me as an instructor. I wanted to address my aims again.

In order to do so, I needed to refocus the class on their personal experiences as Bible readers. However, since the semester was drawing to a close and we had discussed a lot of interesting topics such as: creation, polytheism, and patriarchy, I wanted the class to connect some of the major themes and reflect upon if and how this class changed their ways of reading the Bible. This change would be the personal experience that the class would gain insight into.

In order to know how this class changed the students, they, and I, had to know how they read the Bible before coming to the class. I had never asked them this question! In the next class, I asked them “How did you read the Bible before taking this class and how do you read it now? Has your lens(s) changed, and if so how?”

Other than one person stating that he did not read the Bible before coming to this class, two responses generally reflected two main approaches1) Open-to-academic-Bible- approaches and 2) Uncomfortable-or-bored-with-academic-Bible-approaches---most interested in the Bible as a Christian text.

**Academically open**

“I read the Bible in English, sometimes out loud, usually silently. I went to a Christian high school, so I had Bible class daily. In those classes we did not usually read with commentaries just our own interpretation and the opinions of our teachers and classmates. I only had one Bible teacher who knew Hebrew, but he did not bring it up in class often. I suppose before this Hebrew class sequence, I had a fair amount of faith in the accuracy of the text. I have discovered that the text is not as whole and transparent as I would have thought.”

In her final reflection sequence, which the students wrote after drawings their experiences as Bible readers in the class, this student wrote:
“I guess I realized that my opinions about the Bible had changed. I think of myself as a reasonably constant person, but even over the course of one year my thoughts and concerns have changed a lot. Additionally, I learned how much I learned and absorbed over the course of a semester.”

Religiously Singular

“I had a very high respect for the text before taking this class. I discussed the text with many people. I thought that every letter of the original text was inspired by God. I attended regular sermons held on the Christian Sabbath to hear the text exegetical. I used the text to inform as many decisions in my life as possible. I read the New American Standard, The English Standard version, The King James 1611, and Amplified translations.”

In his final reflection sequence (after the drawing as above) this student wrote:

“I learned that other interpretations do not challenge my own personal religious views of the text. Having surveyed and interacted with the texts of other commentators, I am more convinced now than ever that Jesus of Bethlehem, by his life, suffering, death, and resurrection has fulfilled the law and prophecies of the older testament, and that faith in his one has a chance before a just God.”

New Implementations II, III, and IV

I asked the class to reflect upon each of the readings in a similar manner, posing this question: “How did you understand this text before you studied it in this class and how do you understand it now?” This exercise allowed followed the same pattern as the first reflection with the academically open students acknowledging some kind of change and the religiously oriented students stating that their beliefs were reinforced by our treatment of the text.

Concept Mapping

After explaining how concepts maps work and what their functions are: four of the six students completed their concept maps. We then discussed and built upon one another’s map, for example, one student developed a methods concept map building on what other students worked on in further detail and complexity. These maps provided a useful way for the students to make connection between lenses of analysis and textual themes.

(Links to example of concept map)

Drawing your Bible Reading Trajectory

On the final day of class, I asked the students to draw their journey as Bible readers in this class. I offered them ideas to draw their experiences in the form of a story board, a journey, a metaphor(s), an abstract picture, or anything else that come to mind. All the drawings reflected some kind of struggle and final resolution or final primary question.
V. Final Reflection and Next Steps

It seemed clear from the student’s drawings they understood that the Bible can and is read in legitimately different ways. They also learned that the Bible is not a transparent document with a single interpretation. All but one learned that they had changed as a Bible reader in some way during this course. They did not learn, however, how to connect the different ways of reading to different kinds of actions and identities, although they were aware that engagement with the Bible did influence and reflect social and cultural life. The students’ final papers were much improved from the fall. All but one student identified his or her interpretive lens and worked through a text using a particular academic method. All but one student incorporated different interpretations into their papers.

Next Steps

In my next class, I would be more upfront and consistent with my aims rather than being derailed by grammar and studying more and more texts. I would explain that I am interested in how Bible study influences the students because I find this question the key for engaging in responsible reading.

I would structure the class completely differently. Instead of structuring the class according to the kinds of texts we read, I will structure classes by the ideas such as lens, interpretation, ideology, and application. I would then provide readings, assignments, assessments, and directed reflections for all these concepts.

I would seek to understand how what kinds of knowledge the students brought to class by asking the students to explain in writing how they read the Hebrew Bible in the past, asking them also to describe their lens coming into the class.

When reading and interpreting passages, I will give the students a passage and ask them to identify multiple meanings or how the passage could be interpreted in multiple ways, rather than having different interpretations emerge from different students and myself. I would then ask them to reflect on how these interpretations would construct their practices, identities, and beliefs, creating assignments that enable them to identify where and how the Bible comes up for them in their lives. Once it is established that their Bible reading influences them at certain times and places, I will ask them to journal during these times and places on how the Bible affects their identifications, actions, and relationships. I would then ask them to come up with their own way of incorporating these reflections into a final assignment.

I would also let students know that if they insist upon continually interpreting the Hebrew Bible as a fulfillment of Christian doctrine they must account for their views and detail how this orientation leads to the construction of specific identities and actions. I would ask everyone if their lenses may
discriminate against or define others in ways that they do not define themselves. I now understand that it is to my and the students benefit for me to understand all lenses, including the religious ones and will find ways for students to express their religious readings in class. In order to do this, I am beginning to confront my own discomfort with fundamentalist Christian doctrine. I would, however, ask those with fundamentalist doctrines whether they know the difference between witnessing and reflecting and will make this difference explicit for them in assignments and assessments.

References


0.1 Genesis 6, 1-8

0.1.1 Translation

1. And it was, that the man had begun to become many upon the face of the land (or, ground); and they bore daughters for them.

2. And the sons of God (סֵגוֹד) saw the daughters of the man, that they are good, and they took wives for them out of all whom they chose.

3. And Yahweh said, “My spirit will not dwell\(^1\) in the man for eternity, in their sinning\(^2\), he is flesh, and his days will be one hundred and twenty years.

4. The nephilim were in the land in those days, and even after thus, the sons of God came to the daughters of the man and they bore for them; they were mighty which are from eternity, the men of the name\(^3\).

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\(^1\) Or, 'judge,' but there are problems with the ב of מֶלֶךְ. The meaning of מִלְכָּה, here is dubious. Some read מִלְכָּה, govern, or מִלְכָּה, dwell in.

\(^2\) Or 'because of their sinning.' BDB[1]:

perhaps Inf. estr. sf., by reason of their going astray.

Gesenius[2] states:

מִלְכָּה in their error, Gn 6\(^2\) (so ed. Mant. [which is his abbreviation for a Biblia Hebraica in 1742-2\(^2\)], but there is also good authority for מִלְכָּה, from מִלַּ֥כָּה = מִלַּ֥כָּה and מַלִּ֥כָּה also; so Bauer and Ginsburg).

JPS translates: “... for that he also is flesh...” for מַלְכָּה אֶלְּהָ הָאֱלֹהִים

\(^3\) Or, men of repute. BRB[7] reads:

מַלְכָּה (... √ unknown ...) ... [definition] 2. ... b. = reputation; ... make oneself a name ... = fame, glory ....
5. And Yahveh saw that much (or, great) was the wickedness of the man in the land, and every design⁴ [and] thought of his heart was only (or, altogether) evil, every day⁵.

6. And Yahveh was sorry that he had created the man in the land, and he grieved himself to⁶ his heart.

7. And Yahveh said, “I will blot out the man which I formed from upon the face of the land: from the man to beast, to crawling thing, to the bird of the heaven, because I am sorry that I created them (מָנוֹשֶׁה).”

8. But Noah found favor in the eyes of Yahveh.

⁴יָדַע means form/framing/purpose. The meaning here is ‘framing of the mind.’
⁵לוּל לוֹשֶׁנָּה is a figure of speech usually rendered ‘always/continually’.
⁶Perhaps מַעַן, ‘even as far as’ or ‘even unto.’
0.2 Some words of interest

0.2.1 הַרְעִים

Translated, 'giants' in BDB[1], all the other translations that I see either use 'nephilim' or 'giants.' The Lexicon[1] uses the Septuagint to justify 'giants,' but otherwise mentions that the meanings suggested in various sources are 'all very precarious.' Calvin[3] states:

As to the Hebrew noun, הַרְעִים, its origin is known to be from the verb לָפֵת, which is to fall; but grammarians do not agree concerning its etymology. Some think that they were so called because they exceeded the common stature; others, because the countenance of men fell at the sight of them, on account of the enormous size of their body; or, because all fell prostrate through terror of their magnitude. To me there seems more truth in the opinion of those who say, that a similitude is taken from a torrent, or an impetuous tempest; for as a storm and torrent, violently falling, lays waste and destroys the fields, so these robbers brought destruction and desolation into the world. ... Elsewhere, I acknowledge, the same word denotes vastness of stature ...

0.2.2 בָּנִיֵּי אֶלֹהִים

All translations use 'sons of God.' These sons of God do not seem to be referenced elsewhere in the Bible. In explanation of this eccentric reference, Calvin[3] gives details about other positions, including his own:
That ancient figment, concerning the intercourse of angels with women, is abundantly refuted by its own absurdity; and it is surprising that learned men should formerly have been fascinated by ravings so gross and prodigious. The opinion also of the Chaldean paraphrast is frigid; namely, that promiscuous marriages between the sons of nobles, and the daughters of plebeians, is condemned. Moses, then, does not distinguish the sons of God from the daughters of men, because they were of dissimilar nature, or of different origin; but because they were the sons of God by adoption, whom he had set apart for himself; while the rest remained in their original condition.

It is important to reference the passage in הינש 3, 3:

עראדנה כללאים

Where it is clear that the word ‘to God’ is an adjective describing the greatness of the ‘city.' Here, it seems likely to me that the interpretation of ‘sons of God’ could be something like ‘sons of greatness,’ or even ‘large, great men’ referring to their size.
Bibliography


*Psalms 82 (1–8):*

A Psalm of Asaph.

1 God is taking a stand in the congregation of strength. He will judge among the gods.¹

2 Until when will you judge injustice, and rise before criminals? Selah

3 Govern the poor and orphan; Do justice to the poor and the afflicted.

4 Bring the poor and needy into security. Deliver (them) from the hand of criminals.

5 They will not know, and they will not understand. They will walk in darkness. All the foundations of the earth will be shaken.

6 I said "You are gods, and all of you are children of the most high.

7 But you will die as a man, and fall as one of the princes.

8 Let God arise, let him judge the earth, for you will inherit all the nations.

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¹"The assembly of El" recalls the traditional Canaanite idea of a hierarchical assembly of gods in which El sits on his throne surrounded by gods as his heavenly council (Hersfeld, 352).
There are three interpretations:

- The psalm announces the death of the gods of the nations, because they do not fulfill their duty of accomplishing right and justice on earth, and it proclaims Yhwh as the only true God. ('adat El) the term “assembly of El” is said to reveal the Canaanite origin of idea; according to this the old god El retained his role as “president” of the assembly even though the new young god Baal had in the meantime taken over the function of “king” of the gods.

- The psalm condemns in alienating language human judges (officials and kings) who misuse their office. The principal argument of this type of interpretation is that the reproaches or accusations presented in v.2-4 are shaped in the language of prophetic social criticism, but also in that of the so-called codes for judges or officials (Ex 23:1-9, De 16:18-20).

- The psalm expresses a powerful social critique. In that it reveals the antisocial behavior of the Canaanite officialdom as the consequence of their adherence to the Canaanite religion — and at the same time combats such behavior in the name of the Yhwh religion.

As a failure of the gods of the nations, the psalm sees no other way out than that these gods must disappear from the stage of the heavens and the world so that Yhwh, the God of Israel, may become the God of all nations — as the savior of the exploited and impoverished masses.

They are “sons of the Most High (who will) die like Adam”. We could translate "Adam" here as "men". In verse 6, "sons of the Most High" means "sons of God". This either means angels or his people Israel (Thus the Lord says: “Israel is My son, My firstborn.” Exodus 4:22).

However, there is a similar picture in the first chapter of Job. The picture shows the angels meeting God in heaven. The sons of God came to where God was. Satan was with them. They talked together (Job 1: 6-12). The important thing here is: God has meetings in heaven with people that are not men but angels. It could be that Satan is the leader of the bad angels.

Likewise, Psalm 82 may be about another meeting like this. God is meeting some of the angels that have power in the world. They get the rulers of the world to do injustice and violence. In the psalm, God says that he wants the rulers of the world to be good to poor people.

*Why are these fallen angels called “gods”? The word "Elohim" means "powers". So these angels are "gods" because they have "powers". But they are not more powerful than God is.*
Reference


<http://www.easyenglish.info/psalms/psalm082-taw.htm>


### Parsing Psalm 82

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This beautiful girl is...

University (Egypt)

First term (attending the class IV)

Building grammar, verbs, more.

Second term IV

Creation!

What is this?

Who did what?

Yaaa

I want to know more...

I can help.

They keep laughing, I'll keep going.

My Hebrew Bible Story
January
Formalism

Art: R. Alter

No Flash Photography

February
Deconstruction

Derrida Co.

I Lived there for 35 years...

Now
New Historicism

Electric Shock Warning?

Tell me what you know!

Please don't shoot
I have a wife and kids!

Interrogating the text
Before I took B.H., I read the Bible in English and derived any understanding or beliefs from the English text. I had been exposed to people using Hebrew to translate specific words at a time to reveal deeper meaning or meaning more accurate definition. I planned on being able to do this through study of B.H. As learned more, specifically through reading Academic articles on different ways and reasons for reading the Hebrew Bible, I learned that there are multiple opinions. Then I crossed the bridge of timeline of Biblical authorship where I learned that the books I have read may or may not have been written when or by whom I thought they were. This did not effect my beliefs or significance of the texts in my life. I also realized that context plays a significant role in translating and understanding the Hebrew Bible - which was missing in all the messages and teaching I have heard. But on the same token, I see how it can be very easy to become obsessive compulsive about every detail and for it to consume my life. One must really
answer the question of why one is reading and translating the Hebrew Bible and how “accurate” it is important to be. At the end, I don’t really feel that I read the Bible any different although I am aware of the other ways people look and read & study this text.