

Teaching the Bible in the Public Schools: Reading the Bible as Literature

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Introduction

As witnessed by a recent *Time* magazine cover story on so-called “religious literacy,” there is increased interest in teaching the Bible in public schools. In principle, this is Constitutionally permissible. Thus, in *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp* (374 US 203, 225 (1963)) the Supreme Court affirmed that the Bible may be taught in public schools provided it is “presented objectively as part of a secular program of education.”

Among the advocates of public school courses on the Bible, there is a rather hot debate over whether the Bible itself should be the central text in the classroom, or whether the Bible should accompany a textbook designed to ensure that “the Bible class” doesn’t turn out to be a devotional exercise that promotes religious beliefs. In 2006 this issue was fought out in the Georgia Legislature, and Georgia passed a law requiring that when the Bible is taught in public schools, the Bible itself must be the central text.

Interestingly, both sides of this debate state their opposition to promoting religion in public schools, and both sides aver their commitment to “teaching the Bible as literature” and to having students “read the Bible as literature.” While such phrases are tossed

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around somewhat glibly, little thought has been given to what it might mean to actually read the Bible as literature, to read it as one might read any book. In *Joseph’s Bones—Understanding the Struggle between God and Mankind in the Bible*, I offer such a reading of the Biblical text. In the discussion below, I will argue that

many of those pushing to have the Bible taught in public schools may be in for a surprise—when the Bible is read as literature, we may discover that the Bible significantly parts company from both Judaism and Christianity, and that the Constitutional and pedagogic questions about how to teach the Bible in public schools are far more complex than has been realized.

Reading the Bible as Literature

The phrase “teaching the Bible as literature” is widely used to denote a non-religious way of teaching the Bible. However, the term itself has no stable meaning. “Teaching the Bible as literature” can mean merely teaching about the Bible understood as a work of literature, or alternatively actually *reading* the Bible as a work of literature. It is on this latter approach that I wish to focus. But what does it mean to “read the Bible as literature”?

One can read the Bible in a variety of ways:

Reading the Bible as Scripture. This is the typical way in which believers have traditionally read the Bible. One comes to the text with certain central religious beliefs about the text, and with purposes which only make sense given those beliefs. These beliefs may include:

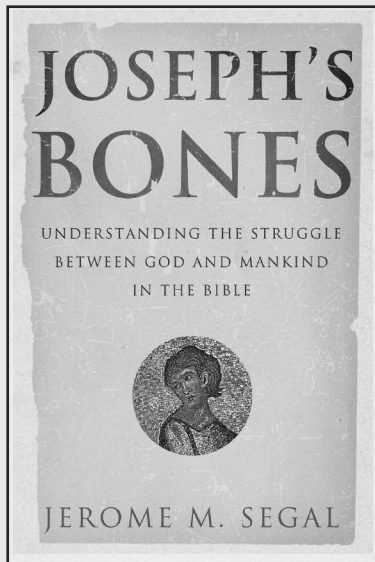
God exists and the character in the text referred to as “God” is God.

God never says what is untrue, and God never commands what is wrong.

The Bible itself is true. It accurately reports what God said and did.

The truth of the Bible emerges from the fact that the Bible is in some sense a revealed text. God has inspired its authorship. Through it, God has revealed certain truths to mankind, and has revealed his will.

Because the Bible is God’s message to us, the Bible is




Joseph's Bones: Understanding the Struggle Between God and Mankind in the Bible
by Jerome M. Segal • \$24.95

“Modest in manner but brilliant in the closeness of its readings, *Joseph's Bones* is a work of stunning originality. Nothing quite like it has appeared in years.”

—Jack Miles, author of *God: A Biography*

A fresh reexamination of the Bible

It's almost impossible to think of the Bible as anything other than the expression of the religious traditions that view it as Holy Scripture. Yet given that vital parts of it were written as much as a thousand years before the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism and the birth of Christianity, there is no obvious reason that this should be true. In this groundbreaking new book, philosopher Jerome Segal argues that if we approach the Bible without preconceptions, we will find something unexpected: a sophisticated and highly cohesive account of the human condition in which morality does not come from God and in which mankind struggles to use morality to limit God's freedom.

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a source for learning both about the nature of reality and about how we should live.

Because the Bible is a true account of God's words and deeds, everything presented in the text must be understood in ways that are consistent with what is true about God, for instance, that God is just.

Reading the Bible through the lens of religion. People who read the Bible as Scripture read it through the lens of their religious beliefs. But non-believers also typically read through the lens of religion. This is the way a student of religion might read the text. It does not require that the reader himself bring any religious beliefs to his reading, but rather he brings beliefs about certain religions and about the place of the Bible in relation to those religions. These might include:

The Hebrew and Christian Bibles are held to be Holy Scripture by the adherents of these religions.

Because the text is fundamental to these religions, it is properly understood in reference to their religious tenets, never asserting what would be incompatible with fundamentals.

Here the question of the truthfulness or validity of what the Bible says is not necessarily of relevance to the reader. One can read through a religious lens, even

when one does not accept the relevant religious tenets.

Reading through a religious lens occurs quite naturally even for those that are not adherents to the relevant religions. For instance, suppose we were anthropologists studying some unfamiliar culture and we came upon a religious text that they view as central to their religion. Were the text open to a variety of interpretations, the most natural approach to attaining a proper understanding of it would be to read it in the light of our understanding of the central religious tenets of that culture.

Reading the Bible as literature. Typically when we read literature, we bring to our reading a fair amount of background knowledge (or belief) about what we are reading. But because in the case of the Bible such beliefs are either religious beliefs or beliefs about religion, I want to define “reading the Bible as literature” in a particularly scaled down way. Thus let me stipulate what I mean by reading it as literature:

The meaning of the text is to be ascertained internally, from what it actually says. No assumptions or beliefs about its divine origin or about persons (including God) or events discussed in the text shape the reader's understanding of what the Bible itself says. Further, no knowledge of religious doctrine is used to understand what is occurring in the text. No assumption is made that the God-character in the text is God.

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Here the effort is to allow the Biblical text to speak for itself in a rather radical manner, to filter out all that we know of how Judaism and Christianity understand the Bible. This is not easy. In some ways this is almost like trying to see the world through a phenomenological reduction, for instance to see a arm chair in one's living room without seeing it as something that is a solid object, something that has sides that one cannot see, something that has an inside in addition to the surfaces present to us perceptually, and so on. With an effort, for a moment, it may be possible to experience in this way, but without concentration we immediately slip back into experiencing the world as filled with solid, three dimensional objects.

To read the Bible in this manner would, in the most thoroughgoing way, be reading it without bringing religion into the classroom.

The Problem

With this understanding in mind, allow me to make some claims:

- People who read the Bible as Scripture are not typically opposed to the idea of reading the Bible without preconceptions (i.e., as literature) because they

unreflectively believe that doing so will produce the same understanding of the Bible that they have. And further they believe that, having understood the Bible, one will come to experience it as a revealed text. It doesn't have to be taught as Scripture to ultimately be experienced as such. This orientation is sometimes expressed in the thought that if one comes to the Bible with an open mind, the Holy Spirit, which is in each of us, will guide us to a proper understanding.

- The Bible is almost never read as literature. Almost all reading of it is through the lens of religion, whether or not one reads it as Scripture.
- Those who read the Bible through the lens of religion are frequently unaware of the fact that they do so, often enough believing that they are reading it as literature.
- One reason the Bible is not read as literature is that it is extremely difficult to do so. It requires exerting considerable self-discipline because we are so familiar with the religious orientations of Judaism and Christianity.
- If one does read the Bible as literature (understanding this as stipulated above) then one's understanding of the text will depart significantly and

dramatically from that attained by reading through a religious lens.

- Most of those who read the Bible as Scripture would be horrified to have their children actually read the Bible as literature.
- When read as literature, the Bible emerges as an extraordinary work, among the finest literary products of Western Civilization.
- To teach the Bible in public schools, but to interpret it though a religious lens, is incompatible with the integrity of the educator's role.

Although one could elaborate on all of these claims, in this short space allow me to focus on one: the claim that reading the Bible as literature will result in an understanding of the Bible quite different from that traditionally held by those who read it as Scripture.

What Happens in the Core Bible Story?

The expectation of many, not just those who read the Bible as Scripture, is that there is a tight fit between these three ways of reading the Bible. And on first thought this would seem plausible enough. After all, why would a text that departed significantly from the fundamental tenets of a religion come to be viewed as Holy Scripture in that religion? And further, given that the religions in question, at least in the modern period,

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all encourage their adherents to read the Bible, if the Bible is in serious variance with those religions, how could this have not produced crisis after crisis?

These are important and perplexing questions. Yet the fact that parts of the Bible were written as much as a thousand years before the emergence of either Rabbinic Judaism or the birth of Christianity, might give one pause. Might this not be the start of an explanation of why it is possible that there is significant divergence between the text and religious belief?

Whatever the explanation, the divergence is there. For instance, consider the following passage from Chapter 6 of Genesis, which relates the story of Noah and opens with this paragraph:

When men began to increase on earth and daughters were born to them, the divine beings saw how beautiful the daughters of men were and took wives from among those that pleased them—The Lord said, "My breath shall not abide in man forever, since he too is flesh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years." —It was then, and later too,

that the Nephilim appeared on earth—when the divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown. [Genesis 6:1-10]

This translation comes from the Jewish Publication Society edition of *The Torah—The Five Books of Moses*. Numerous other translations of the Bible, rather than speaking of "divine beings," translate the Hebrew text with the yet more problematic phrase "the sons of God." Either way, the passage is jarring. We have:

Multiple divine beings (or sons of God),
who find human women sexually attractive, and
who have sex with human women, who
then give birth to a special kind of half-human and
half-divine creature (the Nephilim), who
are "the heroes of old," apparently, the subject matter of an oral or written literature from an earlier period.

This is a rather spectacular example. And if one uses the "sons of God" translation, it raises rather problematic issues—for instance, are not the sons of God also gods? And are they not immortal?

And if so, then isn't the Bible polytheistic? And further, if God has many sons, then how does this affect the standing of Jesus?

While this is a rather daunting set of questions, it must be said that this passage doesn't play a central role in the Biblical narrative and it is possible to view it as such an extreme anomaly that it is best left ignored.

But consider a much more fundamental issue, the relationship between God and morality, as presented in the Biblical text. Here my focus is on the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Consider this:

The Bible never tells us that God is just or even well motivated.

The Bible never maintains that God is the source of morality, that somehow something is right because God commands it, or wills it.

The Bible presents God as a being who has regrets, and thus suggests that he is not omniscient. And in the aftermath of the Flood, when God promises never to do such a thing again, he seems to be regretting this wholesale destruction.

Abraham in the Sodom story, challenges God for his intention to punish the innocent along with the guilty.

Abraham calls on God to be just, implying that not only can he be unjust, but that he is about to be.

The very same type of injustice, of punishing the innocent along with the guilty is raised again and again during the Exodus story, as Moses intervenes to get God to shift his plans.

Moses is presented as largely successful in keeping

God's punishments focused on the wrongdoers.

One of the ways that Moses does this is by playing on God's concern with what the Egyptians will think of him if he destroys the Israelites.

These elements are central to the narrative as one finds it in the Pentateuch, and they are not conclusions reached through some arcane interpretation of the text. Rather, these elements emerge quite naturally as soon as we read the Bible unconstrained from what we think it must be saying. The Bible presents a god who is quite at variance with God as understood by either Judaism or Christianity.

One might be tempted to simply say that typically religious persons, who revere the Bible, misread it. Less controversially, one can say that those religious individuals have a highly-disciplined way of reading the text, quite at odds from the way one would understand any other work of literature.

Implications and Further Questions

If I am correct that reading the Bible as literature yields a very different understanding of the text than does reading through the lens of religion, then we must reconsider the Constitutional question. Specifically, we must ask whether the Constitution permits public school teachers to guide students towards a "lens of religion" understanding of the Bible if this is a sharply divergent reading than that of reading as literature.

We must also ask what implications this approach has for public policy. If reading the Bible as literature will result in upsetting religious students and their

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parents, should this way of teaching be prevented by policy? And if this is forbidden, should other ways of teaching about the Bible still be permitted?

We must also ask, as educators, must a teacher be sure not to offend or upset students with religious beliefs that may be challenged by reading the Bible? How far must we go to avoid offense? What if the true greatness of the Bible as a work of literature only emerges when we appreciate the complexity of its heretical dimensions?

We also must consider whether it is possible to maintain the intellectual integrity of the enterprise if the teacher ensures that standard ways of understanding plot and characterization are suppressed when reading the Bible. And of course, we must consider whether such issues are to be decided by policy makers or are elements of academic freedom.

For public schools, the easy approach to these matters is to simply say, "Who needs such problems! Our hands are more than full just trying to teach the basics of language, math and science and history." And while it is likely that most overburdened school districts will continue to avoid Bible classes, it is unlikely that the issue will ever be fully put to rest. Given that the Bible is both the most influential book in the history of Western civilization and among the greatest works of Western literature, it must somehow be part of everyone's secular education, and thus its exclusion from public education will remain a continuing anomaly.

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Sources: Mark Chauncy, "Reading, Writing and Religion—Teaching the Bible in Texas Schools," A Report from the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund, 2006. Ironically, the situation bears some resemblance to the religious conflicts of the Reformation in which the Catholic Church resisted translating the Bible into the vernacular, and rejected Protestant teachings that asserted the supremacy of the Bible as the authority on all religious doctrine and practice. Unmediated immersion of the general public in the text was viewed by one party as a dangerous practice and by others as opening oneself to the Holy Spirit. R. W. French, "Teaching the Bible as Literature," *College English*, Volume 44, Number 8, December 1982. This is explored in much more depth in my book, *Joseph's Bones: Understanding the Conflict between God and Mankind in the Bible* (Penguin, 2007).