
HOLY DISSENT: TEACHING RELIGIOUS LEADERS TO PREACH AGAINST THE TEXT

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Abstract

Scripture is beautiful, but it has a dark side. As a professor of Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Qur'an, I am familiar with the moments of agony seminarians encounter when they realize that, along with the wonderful parts, the sacred texts hold deeply disturbing laws and narratives that must be dealt with. While many strategies are used in religious communities to cope with the "disturbing bits" in Scripture, I advocate the pedagogical practice of offering future religious leaders the possibility of preaching AGAINST the text, and model an exercise that promotes the formation of ethically empowered exegetes.

Overcoming Scriptural Impotence

I teach an introduction to Hebrew Scriptures course at 9 A.M. on Mondays in fall quarter each year, which means this is often the first class that brand-new seminarians at my institution attend. The students are fresh, excited, full of questions, and often visibly nervous. The School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University draws a particularly diverse and progressive crowd of ministerial students: Catholic, Protestant, Unitarian, Muslim, Jewish, Mormon, and more. Most entering students display a distinct level of disempowerment in regard to sacred text, a disempowerment that I refer to as scriptural impotence. For me, scriptural impotence signifies a state of interaction with Scripture where we passively receive the holy books but do not actively engage them, where we repeat the sacred words but feel unable to challenge them, and where we let the voices from the depths of our traditions define what Scripture means while ignoring our own misgivings or bolts of inspiration.

An introductory Scripture requirement could focus on biblical content and the history of interpretation; that is a tall order in and of itself. The institutional learning

outcomes of our school require an even greater effort. Our ministerial degrees share an imperative: by the end of their course of study, students will be able to “apply their spiritual and moral traditions to address moral and ethical challenges and promote a just and sustainable world.” This goal, fostering the growth and development of religious leaders steeped in social justice, is not the work of one Bible class, but this work begins on the first day of our class and persists throughout the students’ program. No, they will not emerge from our ten weeks together as fully formed preachers and teachers, but this course must necessarily lay down the foundation that students will build upon in their upcoming coursework on history, theology, spirituality, homiletics, and liturgy. This class, and the exercise described below, are designed as the first step toward forming ethically empowered preachers and leaders. In pursuit of this effort, in addition to scriptural content and interpretation, this class has two specific goals:

The first goal is to problematize Scripture. Although so many of us have an experience of Scripture as a fixed tome of words to be studied and memorized, this course must shake up students’ notion of what Scripture is. It needs to present the possibility that Scripture isn’t static and is not univocal, and to ask students to entertain the idea that Scripture is, perhaps, not even a thing that can be edited, bound, and published. Rather Scripture is the process of a community engaging itself, its predecessors, and its evolving ideas about G-d.

The second goal is to help students find their unique ministerial voice. This course is crafted to encourage students to empower themselves vis-à-vis Scripture—to promote original, critical, informed, and ethically oriented exegesis. Within the sacred texts, students encounter a throng of conversation partners from different centuries, geographical areas, theological perspectives, social locations, and power structures. This class aims to demonstrate to students that they too are conversation partners in the scriptural dance, and to convince students that their unique perspective is important, that they are

personally empowered to wrestle with these conversations and critique these theological ideas, and that they can argue for some premises and against others.

We cannot perform a close reading of the entire Hebrew Bible in ten weeks; choices must be made. We could spotlight the beautiful ancestor stories in the Torah and the poetry of the Psalter, but instead we turn our attention to the more distressing, repellent, and frankly abhorrent texts embedded in the Scriptures. I challenge the class to make a list. We grab the dry-erase markers and cover the board with disturbing theological graffiti. Which parts of our traditions' sacred texts do we find disturbing? It only takes a minute for the suggestions to arise, as long-held discomfort with aspects of Scripture bursts forth, seemingly propelled by many years of forcible denial. The parade of violence, misogyny, xenophobia, racism, misuse of power, homophobia, and abuse of children that covers the classroom wall is chilling. The same stories emerge every time: the tale of a deity that is willing to destroy the earth and all things upon it by flood; the slaughter of Egyptian firstborn; the gang rape of the Levite's concubine; the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter, anti-Judaistic name-calling, the abrupt demise of Ananias and Sapphira, Paul's *skubala* problem, the bloodthirsty Whore of Babylon, and many, many more.¹ We find that our beautiful and beloved sacred texts have a very dark side.

Asking the class to consider the ways their own particular social locations influence their reading of these texts, I offer mine: I'm Jewish. I became a convert at thirty years of age, after being raised in Catholic, Episcopalian, Evangelical, and ELCA environments, which formed my attachment to and love of Scripture but did not shape the nature of my scriptural engagement. My current Reform Jewish context encourages deep wrestling with sacred texts and traditions in the pursuit of *tikkun olam*, the ongoing acts of "world repair." My theological identity, my

¹ There are also, of course, Qur'anic examples, but they do not tend to emerge in this particular class.

experience of Scripture (as human words attempting to describe the divine, rather than divine words directed to humans) distresses some students. This distress is usually alleviated as I reassure the class that we aren't seeking consensus in this room; my approach to Scripture should never shape theirs; instead, the possible confrontation between our approaches to sacred texts will assist all of us to become ever better at engaging people whose theology and tradition differs from our own. We are learning to communicate about Scripture with confidence and compassion across great theological distances.

Students share methods (both overt and unspoken) for coping with disturbing texts in Scripture that emerge from their experience and traditions. Many have been trained to simply accept that because the sacred texts are the Word of G-d, they are perfect. If the stories trouble us, too bad; that problem lies with us and not with the canon. Others admit that they basically avoid the distressing texts, deleting them from their "mental canon." Forms of apologetics (particularly historical contextualization) are popular, although students often complain that the ongoing elevation of these texts as "holy" remains problematic. Some daring voices usually name omission as a tool; can we not revise the canon and delete the disturbing stories? Still others reject the sacredness of the Scriptures completely, express a desire to opt out of the exegetical endeavor, and assert their protest that their degree program compels them to take this class!²

I admit to the class that when confronted with a difficult text, I've personally employed all these strategies and tactics at different times. However, as painful as they can be, I do not want us to dismiss or avoid the disturbing texts. Instead, I advocate that the class place the disturbing texts in the center of the room, shine a spotlight on them,

² A longer discussion of these strategies at work can be found in print here: Erica Martin, "Preaching Against the Text: When the "Good Book" Isn't," *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly* (Winter 2016).

and argue against them.³ Why are these texts so offensive to us? These texts offend us because they fail to condemn (and often even uphold) ideas and practices that cause real pain, right now, all around us. The texts we listed on the whiteboard are thousands of years old, but the problems and vices described in them—misogyny, child abuse, homophobia, xenophobia, racism, greed, hatred, abuses of power—aren't just Scripture problems; they are completely current societal problems. What happens if we use these texts as scriptural tools for promoting social justice? What happens when we talk about these troubling and taboo issues, wrestle with them, and come together and make a plan to act on our convictions as a religious community?

Judaism has a rich history of scriptural argumentation. Although I do not ask that the students emulate my views or approach to Scripture, I do request that they provisionally entertain the possibility that one can authentically be a critical lover of one's texts and traditions, and that the act of argumentation with these texts and traditions can itself be understood as holy. Convincing future religious leaders of the need for argument against the text is relatively easy; convincing them that they themselves possess the wisdom and power to do so is much more difficult. We therefore wade in slowly; the first step is suggesting that they have the wisdom and power to argue against their biblical translation.

My first-year students in Hebrew Scriptures class do not read Hebrew.⁴ They are at the mercy of the translators and editors who publish their preferred version. Students tend to be vaguely aware that the translators and editors of the various Bible versions have biases and agendas, but students frequently express resignation; again and again I hear, "I have to rely on the experts."

³ I am forever indebted to Prof. Jeffrey Kuan, who first introduced me to the concept of preaching "against" the text.

⁴ Currently, only our Presbyterian students are required to take Hebrew and Greek.

Targeted Text Studies

In an effort to help students empower themselves vis-à-vis the translated text, we engage in a weekly exercise called Targeted Text Studies. Every week students read a large chunk of biblical text that corresponds to our lesson, but they are asked to concentrate directly on critiquing translations of one small pericope within the reading assignment (usually 10–12 verses).⁵ Although the students do not read Hebrew, by the end of the quarter they can evaluate existing translations and make astute translational choices of their own. Using free, internet-based tools and resources, students can learn about the Hebrew language, explore the semantic fields of key terms, and develop an understanding of translation theory. The most important part of the Targeted Text Study is the following six prompts:

Consider the text:

1. Read the pericope in the NRSV translation, slowly and carefully.
2. Note words or phrases that strike you as important, problematic, or curious.
3. Using our interlinear Bible tools, find out what you can about the words/phrases identified in step two. Make notes.
4. Choose at least three other translations to compare against the NRSV, and read them carefully.
5. Note any differences between the translations, especially regarding the words/phrases you identified in step two.
6. Record your findings. What did you learn? What questions do you still have? Where might you find answers?

⁵ This method also works with the text of the New Testament and Qur'an.

In order to make these prompts as simple as possible to follow, this assignment is posted online as a part our class Canvas Web site, embedded with clickable links to Open Educational Resources (OER's).⁶ When they click on the NRSV translation in step one, they are taken to the pericope on the Oremus Bible Browser Web site.⁷ In step three, links to the pericope in two interlineal Bible tools are provided, at the Web sites for StudyLight and Bible Study Tools.⁸ Within the interlinear tools, students have the ability to click on any word in the English translation of the passage, which produces a pop-up window showcasing the full Brown-Driver-Briggs entry for the corresponding Hebrew word(s), and also includes an audio clip of the Hebrew words' pronunciation. This last feature is especially valuable for teaching the vast amount of word-play present in the Hebrew Bible based on alliteration, consonance, assonance, and punning. Finally, a link in step four takes them to Bible Study Tools to compare three other translations.⁹ As students survey the range of possible meanings of a given word and the decisions made by the translators of each version, they begin to argue for and against particular choices.

Weekly practice of the Targeted Text Study process offers students the space to empower themselves as biblical interpreters, and develop a deeper understanding of how and why they make particular choices about the biblical text. Rather than resigning themselves to the mercy of our translators, students now enter into a conversation with these translators and editors. In their course papers, they feel able to dig deeply into the Hebrew text and offer their own best translation, even if it differs from their

⁶ The links make this process as simple as possible for students to complete, increasing compliance and their ability to think deeply about the text at hand.

⁷ <http://bible.oremus.org/>

⁸ <http://www.studylight.org/>; <http://www.biblestudytools.com/interlinear-bible/>

⁹ <http://www.biblestudytools.com/>

denomination's preferred version or combines two existing translations.

A further set of questions within the Targeted Text Studies encourages students to examine, reflect upon, and eventually be in dialogue with the biblical text itself. Returning to the idea expressed above that sacred texts may offer a throng of theological conversation partners from different centuries, geographical areas, theological perspectives, and social locations, these questions help students to determine a little of the world behind the text.

Consider the historical context(s) of the text:

7. Read the introduction to the book/letter we are studying in the Harper Collins Study Bible (or another quality study Bible) and the specific notes regarding our pericope.
8. What can you learn about the time period this text describes?
9. What can you learn about the time period this text was written in?
10. What can you learn about the redaction history of this text (how and when this text was edited, reedited, arranged, rearranged)?

Consider the text again:

11. Is this pericope part of a larger unit of text?
12. Does this pericope have an identifiable literary form (poetry, allegory, narrative, parable, acrostic, and so on)?
13. Is the text connected to an identifiable author?
14. Who is the implied author of this text?
15. Who is the implied audience of this text?
16. Are any parallels to this text (texts with the same or similar content) found within the biblical canon?
17. Are any contradictory texts (texts with the opposite or conflicting content) found within the biblical canon?
18. Are there any extra-canonical parallels or contradictory texts?

Contextual scrutiny of individual pericopes helps students to deconstruct some of the homogenization wrought by the process of canonization. Focusing on the authorial voices behind our sacred texts helps to unpack the many and varied social and theological contexts of the textual layers within the Scriptures. The many voices of Scripture are free to communicate their agendas and biases, to speak their message clearly and authentically. As these voices become clearer, and as the students become more confident in their ability to enter into a dialogue with the text, the class discussion begins to shift and we ask different questions. These questions are much less focused on the meaning of the text. Instead, we focus on investigation questions such as these: Who is writing? What does the writer want? How is the writer trying to communicate his or her message? And, perhaps most important, Do I agree with this author and message?

The final prompts of the Targeted Text Study invite students to compare and contrast the contexts, agendas, and biases of the texts' different audiences, including the voices of their own religious tradition or denomination and their personal experience of the text:

Consider meanings and messages:

19. What message or meaning do you think this pericope's original audience would have taken from the text?
20. What message or meaning do you think modern audiences take from the text?
21. What message or meaning does my religious tradition draw from this text?
22. What message or meaning do you take away from this text?

Questions seven to twenty-two are a fairly standard array of exegetical starting points, important for the class to understand and practice. It is the first six questions, focused on the Hebrew text and critiquing existing

translations, that serve the specific course goals outlined above.

One example: When conducting a Targeted Text Study on Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard (Isa. 5:1-13), our group discussion invariably focuses on the prophet's words of conviction to the "One Seated in Jerusalem" who is the "Man of Judah" (Isa. 5:3). In the Hebrew, the words for "one seated" and "man" are singular, and as such appear to reference the monarchy, which would therefore be the object of the prophetic critique. The English translations, however, invariably convert these words into the plural, making the "inhabitants of Jerusalem" and "people of Judah" the objects of the divine ire expressed by Isaiah.¹⁰ The class is able to spend time unpacking the possible reasons behind these translational choices, including latent anti-Judaism. Through group discussion and personal reflection, students reach their own decisions regarding how they personally would translate, interpret, and preach or teach this text.

Conclusion

The Targeted Text Study process is only one of a number of ways to help future religious leaders empower themselves in regard to sacred texts and enter into dialogue with them. Whatever method is used, scriptural empowerment is the essential background for the creation of ethically empowered exegesis that allows the exegete to position himself or herself as a critical lover of sacred texts, able to argue against them when necessary.

Ignoring the difficult texts and focusing on the feel-good texts is tempting. However, if we think religion is about making us feel good, we have probably missed the point. In my understanding, the core message of the Hebrew Bible is that the G-d of Israel is a G-d of righteousness and justice, who calls his creation to righteousness and justice also. Quite frankly, for me this is the core message of all three "Abrahamic" canons of

¹⁰ For example, the NRSV, NAB, BBE, NKJV, and many more.

Scripture, which I study and treasure. When I encounter Jesus in the Gospels, his core message is not, “Worship me and you’ll be saved!” Instead, the core message of Jesus in the Gospels is: Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of G-d. Blessed are you who are now hungry for you will be satisfied (Luke 6:20).

The core message of Mohammad in the Qur’an, as I read it, is not “Our prophet is better than your prophets.” The core message of Mohammad in the Qur’an is: Be steadfast in your devotion to G-d and bear witness impartially...adhere to justice, for that is closer to awareness of G-d (Surah 5.8).¹¹ The core message of Moses in my beloved Torah is not, “Y’all are a Chosen People, go feel special about it.” The core message of Moses in the Torah is: *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*—justice, justice shall you pursue (Deut.16:20). If I am interpreting these core messages correctly, then those of us who embrace the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Qur’an as our sacred texts have a job to do: working for justice is our calling. To this end, the disturbing sacred texts are an invaluable resource. The disturbing parts present us with an opportunity to battle the ongoing, modern-day manifestations of the same prejudices, vices, and violence we recoil against when encountering these texts. The difficult texts demand conversation; they demand action. They insist on jolting us out of feel-good complacency to deal with the messy world around us, if we are brave enough to preach against the text.

Later in their degree programs, students will take additional Scripture courses that develop their understanding of critical methodologies, increase their knowledge of historical contexts, and introduce other forms of scriptural argumentation. The Targeted Text Studies in this initial course aim to serve as a tool for ministerial formation every bit as much as they serve to teach the Hebrew Bible. Learning to draw on their unique

¹¹ M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

and critical scriptural voice with confidence, it is my goal that all of us, yes even the professor, experience transformation, empower ourselves, and “apply our spiritual and moral traditions to address moral and ethical challenges and promote a just and sustainable world.”

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