Bible Electives in Public Schools: A Guide

SBL
SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE

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Who We Are: The Society of Biblical Literature

The Society of Biblical Literature is an academic society, founded in 1880, whose mission is to foster biblical scholarship. Our membership includes college, university, and seminary faculty and administrators; students; secondary school educators; clergy; and members of the general public. The SBL is dedicated to core values of scholarly integrity, critical inquiry, respect for diversity, and inclusivity. It is a humanities-based learned society, not a religious organization.

The SBL has already published a number of classroom resources and can help teachers to make decisions about appropriate types and sources of information about the Bible from a scholarly perspective. The SBL continues to develop resources for teachers, students, and administrators; a list of these is available at https://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx.

Why Study the Bible in Public Schools?

The ancient texts collected in the Bible continue to have a major impact on the world around us. They have influenced not only American culture and history but cultures and histories throughout the world. A Bible course that helps students become familiar with the contents of the Bible, understand its development and transmission, and recognize its significance for many peoples and cultures can equip students with a deeper comprehension of the roles of religion in societies past and present. Done well, courses will encourage critical inquiry among students, teach them to read a text closely (and to enjoy it!), and offer them an appreciation for how the Bible has affected politics, history, systems of government, literature, and the arts. Moreover, since the Bible is often used by a variety of social and political groups to advance a range of causes, biblical literacy can help create a more informed and enlightened citizenry, better able to navigate the competing claims about the Bible made by others.

Goals of This Guide

One goal of this guide is to encourage awareness of the pedagogical rewards and academic relevance of teaching about the Bible. Another goal is to provide teachers with some awareness of the academic, social, and legal issues to consider well before a Bible elective begins.

This guide offers a FAQ (frequently asked questions) format for teachers of Bible courses and their communities, school boards, and administrators to consider prior to designing and offering a course. It also touches on the approaches and insights in biblical studies that are widely accepted among scholars, but that may be new to teachers, students, and parents alike. Awareness of scholarly methods and goals and how they differ from religious understandings will provide additional means to judge the content and legality of Bible electives.

Teaching about the Bible

What is the main difference between academic study of the Bible and devotional Bible study?

Scholars try to understand the Bible through the methods of literary and historical analysis. Some emphasize the same sorts of literary features that are found in other works. Others focus on issues such as authorship, intended audience, and what texts may have meant in their ancient contexts; they often draw on archaeological research and the study of other ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman texts. Still others look at how the Bible has been interpreted over the centuries in different contexts and media.

Religious or theological understandings of the Bible sometimes rely on interpretations that would have been unfamiliar to the biblical authors but that are important for particular religious communities. Those who hold religious or theological views of the Bible may regard the text as divinely authored or divinely inspired.

For religious readers, the goals of Bible study are often to remember what they regard as God's work in the past and to encounter what they regard as God's message for today. Meaningful though these goals may be for such readers, they are not appropriate for a public school course or curriculum.

Academic views of the Bible accept it as a set of writings by multiple authors composed over a long period of time, writings that provide rich insight into the world and cultures of ancient Israel, Second Temple Judaism, and early Christianity. Biblical scholars are interested in the way these texts raise moral, social, legal, and philosophical questions that resonate throughout subsequent history and influence our own culture and world today.

Religious and academic goals and assumptions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they are very different in their approaches.

What are some academic goals for a Bible course?

Bible courses can be taught like any other subject: by teaching a range of scholarly views and interpretations and encouraging critical inquiry, open-minded curiosity, and enjoyment on the part of the students.

The academic goals of such a course are similar to the goals of any literature course. Some include:

- to teach students about selected books and passages of the Bible
- to familiarize students with genres, literary forms, themes, characters, plots, and literary devices that occur in the Bible
- to encourage students to enjoy and appreciate the rewards of reading a biblical text closely, with the aid of secondary materials
- to teach students about the formation of the Bible, textual transmission and translation, and canon formation
- to familiarize students with the social, cultural, and political aspects of life reflected in the biblical writings
- to foster appreciation for diverse interpretations of the Bible
- to promote recognition of the wide-ranging ways in which the Bible is important for understanding religions, culture, politics, and the arts
- to stimulate the practice of critical thinking skills

Studying the Bible with these goals in mind helps students understand that its writings are rich in meaning and artistry and full of dramatic conflicts and narrative power, memorable characters, and metaphorical and moral creativity. Sound scholarship can help them see the complexity of the biblical text in new ways. Such study strengthens their preparation for college and for rewarding encounters with literature in general.

Constitutional Requirements

All schools want to respect parental choices about the religious upbringing of their children. No public school wants to create discord among parents or wrangle with costly lawsuits. Because of the high level of concern about legal issues, many other excellent resources are also available for schools on First Amendment issues. (See list at end.)

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution includes two religion clauses: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The Establishment Clause prohibits government "establishment" of religion. The Free Exercise Clause prohibits government interference with the free exercise of religion. Although these clauses originally applied only to Congress, the Supreme Court has since determined that they also apply to state and local governments and officials. Public school teachers, whenever they are acting in their capacity as teachers, are prohibited from engaging in activity that violates

either of these principles. What this means in the public school classroom is that neither the teacher nor the school can either promote or discourage students from having religious beliefs.

All state constitutions also contain provisions concerning religious exercise and nonestablishment, and most have more explicit provisions governing religion and education. Educators should consult their own state's constitution; information is usually available through state education departments or state school boards associations.

Teachers are free to teach about religion from an academic perspective if they do so in ways that adhere to federal and state law. While the Supreme Court prohibited school-sponsored Bible reading that was done as a ritual or religious exercise, it explicitly affirmed the value of scholarly study of the Bible undertaken for the sake of cultural literacy. The Court emphasized, "Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment" (*Abington Township School District v. Schempp* 374 U.S. 203 at 225 [1963]).

How does a school conform to the Court's standard?

- A school's approach to the Bible must be academic, not devotional; the teacher should teach about the Bible, not lead a "Bible study." Such teaching is constitutional when done in a way that neither promotes nor disparages particular religious beliefs. Teacher engagement in religious teaching, advocacy, indoctrination, proselytizing, or practice in the classroom—whether intentional or unwitting—is unconstitutional.
- The school strives for student awareness of the Bible but not acceptance of claims about the truth of or theological interpretations of the Bible in a religious sense.
- The school may introduce students to a diversity of religious views about the Bible but may not impose, discourage, or encourage any particular religious view.
- The school may neither promote nor denigrate any religious understanding of the Bible (adapted from The First Amendment Center, "The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide," at https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/BibleGuide.pdf).

Legal Issues and Precedents

Are there legal standards to evaluate course legality?

Yes. Courts have typically relied on two tests to determine the constitutionality of Bible courses and related matters: the Lemon Test and the Endorsement Test. In the court case *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, which addressed government reimbursement of religious schools, the Supreme Court identified three questions that can be used to determine government compliance with the Establishment Clause. These questions are now known as the Lemon Test. Here is what those questions look like when applied to a Bible course (see *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602 [1971]):

1. Does the course have a secular, academic purpose?
2. Does the course have the primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion?
3. Does the course foster excessive government entanglement with religion?

Generally, courts would require the answers to these questions to be Yes, No, and No for a course to pass the Lemon Test.

Applying the Endorsement Test to Bible courses requires asking the question: Does the course have the purpose or effect of endorsing religion in general or particular religious viewpoints? Courts would expect the answer to be No for a course to pass the test.

Stated simply, "If that which is taught seeks either to disparage or to encourage a commitment to a set of religious beliefs, it is constitutionally impermissible in a public school setting" (*Wiley v. Franklin*, 474 F. Supp. 525 [E.D. Tenn. 1979]).

The rationale is clear: "Families entrust public schools with the education of their children but condition their trust on the understanding that the classroom will not purposely be used to advance religious views that may conflict with the private beliefs of the student and his or her family. Students in such institutions are impressionable and their attendance is involuntary" (*Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 584 [1987]).

Applying the Law and Implementing Best Practices

How do I teach an unbiased course?

Teaching in an unbiased way requires close readings of the text, respect for religious diversity in the school and community, familiarity with scholarly goals and approaches to literature, and an awareness of how some biblical interpretations are influenced by religious belief.

Court cases surrounding teaching about the Bible in public schools typically relate to biased instruction. Biased teaching might promote certain religious beliefs—describing the Bible as the word of God, for example, or teaching Genesis 1 as an accurate historical account of creation. Or, it might denigrate or disparage particular religious beliefs or religion in general.

It is important to remember that teachers and students have the protected right to hold beliefs about the accuracy or inaccuracy of any passage within the Bible or the whole of the Bible. What is not permitted is for public schoolteachers to present material in such a way as to promote their own religious or anti-religious beliefs to students.

These are more obvious forms of bias, but subtle ones exist as well. Portions of the Bible have been read and interpreted for approximately three thousand years, and particular interpretations of biblical passages have often become an important part of our culture or ways of understanding the world. Sometimes it is the *interpretations* we remember and pass on rather than what the biblical text actually says. For example, in Isaiah 53, Jews have traditionally associated the "suffering servant" with the Israelite people, Jews in exile, and a messiah yet to come. Christians have traditionally associated the "suffering servant" with Jesus, interpreting Isaiah 53 as predicting him specifically. Students might benefit enormously from knowing about how these traditional interpretations differ, but no interpretation should be taught as if it is the definitive meaning of the text. A well-taught Bible course would look at Isaiah 53 in its original context, then perhaps at the ways in which later Jewish and Christian readers in different places and times interpreted the text and gave it new meanings.

Likewise, some denominations give added emphasis to some books or passages of the Bible over others. If a public school Bible elective were to carry over that selective emphasis, it could unconstitutionally privilege a denominational preference or tradition in the classroom.

May a class on the Bible be paid for by general public funds?

Yes, provided that the course complies with the constitutional requirements described above.

Can outside associations and nonprofit organizations contribute (funds, publicity, or materials) in part or in whole to a course?

Yes, as long as there are no strings attached, and the school maintains complete control over the selection of the teacher and the curriculum. The legal requirements do not change when outside groups donate resources or fund courses. The courses still must be as objective as possible and must neither promote nor endorse religious beliefs. In particular, donated Bibles may not represent only one religious community, as, for example, Gideon Bibles, with their Protestant perspective, do.

What role may outside organizations play in choosing, hiring, and supervising teachers?

Outside organizations—a church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious organization—may

play no role in choosing, hiring, or supervising teachers for these courses. If such a group were to be involved in teacher selection, the public school could open itself to legal action, particularly if selection was based on religious views.

What if teachers inadvertently pass on particular religious preferences or points of view in the classroom but believe they are being unbiased and sticking to "just the facts"?

Even if the intent is to neither promote nor denigrate religion, if the effect is to impart a particular religious view whether intentionally or not, the course has crossed the line and can be challenged legally. Courts consider the effect upon the students as more important than the intent of the teacher.

Can a teacher assign students to memorize particular passages, such as Psalm 23 or the Lord's Prayer?

Memorization may sometimes be an appropriate teaching technique, depending on the pedagogical goals and the criteria for selecting passages. But the association of scripture memorization with religious practice means its classroom use may generate controversy, and some court rulings have specifically commented on it as a devotional act. (See *Good News Club v. Milford Central Sch.* 533 U.S. 98, 119 [2001] and *Doe v. Porter* 188 F. Supp. 2d 904, 9112 [E.D. Tenn., 2002].) It is clear that teachers cannot use scripture memorization as a form of prayer or devotional exercise or to promote particular religious viewpoints and sentiments.

Can a school require students to take the Bible course?

No. Requiring students to take a course is coercive, controversial, and legally problematic. Some students may see such a requirement as showing favoritism toward some religious views over others. Others may believe that the very act of approaching the Bible from a critical or academic (rather than a religious) perspective violates their religious beliefs and practices.

Teacher Qualifications

What qualifications should a teacher have to teach a Bible course?

Some states require teachers of Bible electives to be state-certified in either English Language Arts or Social Studies. SBL recommends that, at a minimum, teachers should have taken course work in biblical or religious studies at an accredited undergraduate level or higher institution, including a course on Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and one on the New Testament. Courses in religious education, which prepare teachers to teach at religious institutions, generally do not by themselves offer the type of preparation necessary to teach in a public school setting. If teachers took coursework at a religious institution, they should take special care not to impart a particular religious or sectarian orientation in the classroom.

How can teachers get additional training to offer Bible courses?

Teachers should contact state education agencies to see if they provide any in-service training. If none exists, they should ask their states to develop it.

Are schools allowed to consider religious beliefs when selecting a teacher?

No. Schools should make hiring decisions based upon the qualifications of the teachers and their ability to teach the course academically, not the particular religious beliefs of the teacher. Competence to teach should be judged by *academic* standards, the same as for any other subject, such as English Language Arts or History.

Can a teacher's religious beliefs make that candidate more qualified?

No. It is not teachers' beliefs or lack of beliefs that qualify them to teach but their academic training.

Can a teacher of a Bible course in the public schools also be an ordained clergy member?

Yes, if he or she meets all of the standards and qualifications for any other teaching position and state certification, if applicable. In other words, the fact of ordination may not be held as a prejudice against the person. While ordination does not disqualify a potential teacher, a clergy member should take extra care not to use his or her position to influence students' religious beliefs. Separate issues may also arise around whether a public school teacher can wear religious garb in schools and classrooms or whether members of that person's congregation can be students in the class.

Course Design

What kind of Bible course should be taught?

Just as there are several different ways scholars study the Bible, so there are several different ways teachers might organize Bible courses. Some courses might adopt a literary focus. Others might emphasize how biblical texts reflect and were shaped by their ancient historical contexts. Still others might examine what scholars call "reception history"—how the Bible has been received and interpreted in subsequent literature, art, music, and other spheres of culture.

One type of course that schools should avoid is the "Bible as history" approach that treats the Bible as a straightforward source for reconstructing history. Courses that treat the Bible this way are, in effect, promoting a particular religious viewpoint and potentially putting their school districts in legal jeopardy. For example, a course that presents stories of miracles or of God's intervention as historically accurate is impermissibly making theological claims. Historical debates, however, are not limited to just those types of stories. Scholars and different religious communities have widely diverging views on just how accurate different parts of the Bible are. Teachers may, however, carefully discuss historical aspects of biblical texts without lapsing into assumptions of complete historical accuracy.

How might communities decide to offer a Bible elective?

Many communities considering a Bible course open up the decision-making process. Often the local school board creates a committee made up of a broad range of participants, including students, teachers, parents, and school administrators. The committee invites community responses to the electives, reviews curricular materials, and makes a recommendation to the board. The Society of Biblical Literature may be able to put communities and their schools in touch with local Bible scholars to help guide their decision-making process, especially when it comes to evaluating teaching materials.

Many people in the local community may have concerns about a course focused on the Bible. Some will worry that school officials will attempt to persuade students to adopt biblically based religious beliefs; others will object to the idea that the Bible can be taught as a historical or literary text that can be approached through critical inquiry; still others may object to any approach to the Bible other than the one that promotes their specific beliefs.

What is the most appropriate grade level to take a Bible course?

State and/or local education departments may have established the answer to this question. In most states, the courses are limited to high school. Students in grades 11–12 are typically better equipped to handle sensitive subject matter than students in earlier grades.

What should the course be called?

In some cases state education agencies will have given a name to the course(s). "Introduction to the Hebrew Bible" or "Introduction to the New Testament" might be used, or simply "Introduction to the Bible I" and "Introduction to the Bible II." The name "Hebrew Bible" is considered preferable in a public school context to "Old Testament," which reflects a Christian perspective (see below).

Bibles

What Bible should we use in class?

An academic course on the Bible should teach students about the different forms in which the Bible has come to us today. There is, in fact, not one Bible but several Bibles. One way to demonstrate this in class is through a handout listing the biblical books associated with the canons of different groups.

The Christian Bible, or canon, has two parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. For all branches of Christianity, the New Testament has twenty-seven books. However, the number of books in the Old Testament varies. For Protestants, it is thirty-nine; for Roman Catholics, forty-six. For many Eastern Orthodox Christians, it is also forty-six, but for others it may be higher, as is also the case with Oriental Orthodox Christians.

Jewish Bibles do not include the New Testament, and Jews do not typically use the Christian terminology of "Old Testament." Jews call their scripture the Tanakh or simply the Bible. It contains the same contents as the Protestant Old Testament, but its writings are grouped into twenty-four, rather than thirty-nine, books, and those books are arranged in a different order. Many scholars refer to the books in the Tanakh and the Protestant Old Testament as the Hebrew Bible, a more neutral term that reflects the fact that they were originally written almost entirely in Hebrew.

Which Bible translation should be used in class?

The choice of translation or translations to use is a complex one, both academically and legally. The courts have not spoken with great clarity on this issue, except to note on occasion that the choice of the King James Version (KJV) seemed to reflect a bias toward certain forms of Protestant Christianity. However, it might be appropriate to assign the KJV in a Bible as Literature course, due to its significant literary influence in the English-speaking world.

Other widely used translations include The New American Bible, The New International Version, The New Revised Standard Version, The Revised Standard Version, and The New Jewish Publication Society Translation. All of these are possibilities for classroom use if presented in combination, not exclusively.

The course should find creative ways to expose students to a variety of translations. Teachers might assign different translations of a particular passage to different groups of students and allow class discussion to explore those differences. They might have students read different translations aloud for the class as a whole. Or they might prepare a handout of how several different translations render a particular passage.

Teachers should be aware, however, that the presence of multiple translations may occasionally present challenges to close readings of a text, precisely because students will not be reading from a common text. Likewise, students may ask the instructor to referee which version is more accurate or otherwise "better," a question most safely declined.

Parallel Bibles, which present different translations of the same passages side-by-side, can be valuable classroom resources as long as they do not limit the available translations to a particular religious community. A reader such as the Hendrickson Parallel Bible would not be appropriate as an assigned book, for example, because it features only Protestant translations of the Bible. Similarly, the Zondervan Comparative Study Bible features only translations typically favored by Christian evangelical communities.

THREE BIBLICAL CANONS

Jewish Tanakh

Torah/Instruction
Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

Nevi'im/Prophets
(Former Prophets)
Joshua
Judges
Samuel
Kings
(Latter Prophets)
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Ezekiel
Book of the Twelve (which includes:
Hosea, Amos, Micah,
Joel, Obadiah, Jonah,
Nahum, Habakkuk,
Zephaniah, Haggai,
Zechariah, and Malachi)

Ketuvim/Writings
Psalms
Job
Proverbs
Ruth
Song of Songs
Ecclesiastes
Lamentations
Esther
Daniel
Ezra-Nehemiah
Chronicles

Protestant Old Testament

Pentateuch
Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

Historical Books
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 Chronicles
2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther

Poetic and Wisdom Books
Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Songs

Prophetic Books
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

Catholic Old Testament

Pentateuch
Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

Historical Books
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Kings (1 Samuel)
2 Kings (2 Samuel)
3 Kings (1 Kings)
4 Kings (2 Kings)
1 Chronicles
2 Chronicles
1 Esdras (Ezra)
2 Esdras (Nehemiah)
Tobit
Judith
Esther with additions
1 Maccabees
2 Maccabees

Poetic and Wisdom Books
Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Songs
Wisdom of Solomon
Ecclesiasticus (Sirach)

Prophetic Books
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Baruch
Ezekiel
Daniel with additions
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

Many Jews consider Messianic Jewish translations such as the Complete Jewish Bible and the Tree of Life Bible to be offensive.

Can students use their own personal Bibles as their primary text?

Yes, but students should be expected to compare translations and read other translations for class assignments.

Can a school district mandate the use of one Bible translation and forbid others?

No.

May the Bible be the only textbook assigned for the class?

In part this is an issue that state school boards and legislatures will have to resolve. However, it is misleading to describe the Bible as a textbook, since it was not written for the high school classroom by a panel of educators. We recommend using secondary literature from various academic sources and several different translations of the Bible as primary texts.

While it is appropriate to have different translations of the Bible used as texts, courses that use it as the only text could be problematic and subject to legal challenge. Reading the Bible without any critical resources or discussion could easily come across as treating the Bible as an inspired text that is authoritative on matters of history, science, and law, not to mention faith. To read the Bible this way may work well in religious communities, but it is not appropriate in the classroom.

Resources

What textbooks and curricular resources can we use to teach such a class?

Most readily available resources on the Bible are written for use in religious communities. Look instead for materials designed for use in a public school or undergraduate setting. Read the author's introduction and check his or her academic credentials. The SBL website contains some examples of teacher syllabi that are being used at the undergraduate level.

Currently there are two curriculum guides on the market for Bible courses in public high schools: *The Bible in History and Literature*, published by the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools (NCBCPS); and *The Bible and Its Influence*, published by the Bible Literacy Project and Essentials in Education.

Scholarly reviews of the NCBCPS's *The Bible in History and Literature* have repeatedly noted its low academic quality, factual errors, and heavy bias. Its constitutionality has been challenged legally twice because of its promotion of particular religious views. In the first case, a federal judge issued an injunction against the teaching of its units on the New Testament in Fort Myers, Florida (*Gibson v. Lee County*, 1 F. Supp. 2d 1426 [M.D. Fla. 1998]). In 2008, a lawsuit against Ector County Independent School District in Odessa, Texas, was dismissed when the school district agreed in a mediated settlement to discontinue use of the NCBCPS curriculum.

The Bible Literacy Project's *The Bible and Its Influence* has not yet been legally challenged, but it has experienced a mixed reception from biblical scholars and legal commentators. It often successfully employs literary reading strategies and highlights how the Bible has been interpreted in the arts and letters, and it is also sensitive to traditional differences between Jewish and Christian interpretations. However, its summaries of narrative content often veer close to a "Bible as history" approach. It also tends to emphasize ways in which the Bible has been used as a source for positive social and personal transformation while

downplaying ways in which it has been used to legitimize injustice or oppression.

Are any study Bibles available for use in class?

Two well-regarded study Bibles are the *Harper Collins Study Bible* and the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*; the study notes for each were written by a diverse group of scholars. Do not assign study Bibles written primarily for the purpose of religious instruction or faith formation, as this may make it difficult to pass the Lemon and Endorsement Tests.

Should courses incorporate visits by guest speakers?

Teachers should check to see if this is allowable under district policies. If colleges or universities are located nearby, faculty may be available to provide information from a scholarly perspective.

Inviting religious leaders or other representatives of particular religious groups to discuss the role of the Bible in their own traditions can be very problematic, especially if the guests use the opportunity to promote their religious views. It is easy for discussions in such visits to veer into territory best left to venues other than a public school classroom. Teachers and students should remember that such guests are most authoritative when speaking of the beliefs and practices of their own particular community, but they may not be familiar with the views of other branches of their tradition or with other traditions.

Should courses incorporate visits to houses of worship?

Teachers should check to see if this is allowable under district policies. While visits to synagogues, churches, and other houses of worship may sometimes be useful for helping students to understand the roles of scripture in particular communities, they also invite controversy. Some parents may be uncomfortable exposing their children so directly to a religious environment different from their own. Some students may be uncomfortable for the same reason. Observers might misconstrue such visits as school-sponsored participation in worship, which is unconstitutional. As an expression of hospitality, members of the congregation might invite students to participate in religious rituals, practices, readings, prayers, and songs, but this may prompt negative responses ranging from complaints by students, parents, and community members to lawsuits.

Faith and Belief

What if parents are afraid that a Bible elective will change their child's faith?

Two academic studies have shown that students who are exposed to the academic study of religion learn to become critical thinkers and are enriched by the classroom experience. A study of 553 courses in public and private colleges by Professor Barbara Walvoord of the University of Notre Dame found that, "contrary to some stereotypes, the introductory theology and religion course did not throw great numbers of its 'secure Christian' students into struggle and doubt about their faith. Nor did it leave them untouched. By far the most common response to the course … was a wide-ranging, often joyful exploration and change across multiple dimensions, including elements of critical thinking" (*Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses*).

Similarly, a study of a world religions class in a Modesto, California, high school found that many students who had taken the class were able to "maintain their same views about the rightness of their religious tradition compared to others after taking the course" (Emile Lester and Patrick S. Roberts, "Learning about World Religions in Public Schools").

How should a teacher respond to a student's personal question about what the teacher personally believes about the Bible and/or religion?

It is up to each teacher to decide how to handle questions from students about personal belief.

Declining to answer such questions is perhaps the safest approach. But teachers might answer such questions outside of class as long as they neither attempt to persuade students to adopt or reject particular beliefs nor otherwise create the appearance that the school endorses particular beliefs. Teachers must take extra care to ensure that their conversations with students do not lead students or others to believe that the Bible course is being used to endorse, promote, challenge, or disparage any religious beliefs whatsoever.

How should teachers respond if students initiate discussions of religious beliefs?

A teacher may acknowledge a student's classroom expression of personal religious beliefs, but such expressions must not be allowed to dominate, impede, or sidetrack discussion or other class activities. Students should not be allowed to ask the religious opinions of other students in class, but well-handled discussions of different student interpretations can help pupils learn that others read and understand the text differently than they do. In this way, Bible classes can foster not only an academic understanding of the material but also respect for the beliefs of others.

How can this be done?

Modern scholars attempt to solve problems or answer questions that have arisen over the centuries as many people have read and studied the Bible. Teachers can draw students into this scholarly endeavor by asking whether students see any problems or curious features in the text (e.g., "Why are there four gospels, not just one? And why do they sometimes seem to agree and then disagree with one another about what Jesus said and did?"). Teachers can then invite students to provide their own alternative answers to these questions. Scholarly interpretations of biblical passages may be useful here because they can alert students to problems and questions of which the students were previously unaware.

Another way might be to present students with different historical interpretations of the same biblical text or to expose them to a piece of contemporary literature or art that alludes to and interprets that text. Ideally, this process engages students to become more critical observers and thinkers.

Can student work and classroom participation include religiously derived responses?

As in many other courses, students may bring into the classroom information they have acquired in other settings, including religious ones. They are permitted to express their own personal beliefs as long as they do so in response to the teacher's assignment and their comments do not interfere with or sidetrack that assignment. But assignments should only rarely prompt students to discuss their religious beliefs and should never require them to do so.

May students engage in devotional Bible study outside of a course while in school?

Normally, during free time (e.g., lunch) students individually or collectively may engage in devotional Bible study provided it does not interfere with the rights of other students. Additionally, under the Equal Access Act, students may organize and participate in non-curriculum-related clubs, such as Bible clubs, during noninstructional times. The Equal Access Act allows student-led clubs to have a staff sponsor who may attend the club meetings, but the sponsor is not supposed to participate in any religious activities with the students. Best practices would direct that an instructor of a Bible course not serve as the sponsor of a student-led Bible club.

If a teacher knows the particular religious background or faith commitment of a student, can the teacher ask him or her to state the views of that religious community?

No. Teachers must not ask students to speak as representatives of a particular faith (e.g., "Janet, you're Jewish—how do Jews read this

passage?"). That type of question puts students on the spot, exposes their religious views without their consent, and asks them to speak as representatives of a religious tradition. However, students are free to offer interpretations grounded in their faith tradition, provided that they address the subject at hand and do not use the classroom to proselytize, advocate for their own religious convictions, or disparage the beliefs of others.

Biblical Interpretation

Can teachers teach the Bible as history?

Scholars agree that the Bible is a valuable source of historical information, but their views on the extent of its accuracy vary widely. In addition, disagreement exists between and within religious groups about how much of the Bible is historically accurate. The courts have recognized this variety of views and have argued that to teach biblical accounts of the past as statements of historical fact is to promote a particular religious belief and thus is an infringement of the First Amendment. For both academic and legal reasons, teachers should not teach the Bible as a history book or a source of scientific knowledge that accurately records past events.

For example, it would be a breach of the teacher's impartiality to teach Genesis as proof that the earth was created in six days or to use any related creation science materials.

How should dates and years be notated when discussing ancient history and biblical periods?

Traditionally, much of Western culture has used "Before Christ" (BC) and "Anno Domini" (AD, "year of the Lord") to mark historical time periods, especially when discussing ancient history. However, many non-Christians find this dating form biased because it assumes the Christian theological claim that Jesus is Christ (i.e., messiah) and Lord. Biblical scholars and many others now prefer the terms "Before the Common Era" (BCE) and "Common Era" (CE); there is no difference in the actual dating method (i.e., 586 BCE is the same as 586 BC).

How should a teacher discuss negative depictions of particular religious groups in the Bible?

Two concerns are important here. One is that the biblical texts can be read not only at face value but also with an eye to the times in which they were written. The other is that we cannot generalize from the text about modern religious groups.

For example, the four gospels contain several negative references to Jewish leaders, Pharisees, temple priests, the temple, and Jewish law. There are variations between them; the Gospel of Matthew's denunciations of the Pharisees are the harshest (Matt 23), while the Gospel of John contains language seemingly hostile toward Jews in general (John 8:44). Such views often reflect the tensions of the times, when early Christianity was still trying to work out its relationship with Judaism, its parent religion—a process that took centuries. Thus, the Gospel of John's judgments about Jews and Judaism cannot be considered objective descriptions, as they were often polemical. To take such passages out of their historical context and use them to vilify Jews or Judaism is both academically and ethically indefensible.

With respect to this particular example, teachers should note that there are numerous resources that discuss the time in which Jesus lived, Jesus's Jewish identity, and early Christianity's relationship with Judaism. Teachers can encourage their students to look into the "world of the text" to understand why the writers of the gospels may have chosen the words they chose.

Conclusion

Well-taught Bible courses can open students to understanding famous texts in new ways and enrich their encounters with literature over a lifetime. There are challenges to crafting such a class, to be sure. Bible electives are unlike other public-school courses because of the religious

nature of the material. Furthermore, many Bible elective courses are being taught for the first time. Appropriate teaching materials are scarce, as are teachers with preservice or in-service training in the subject. Consequently, the risks are real that some teachers may impart religious bias in their classes, whether intentionally or not. But careful planning can help teachers navigate these challenges and offer academically and legally appropriate courses that promote cultural literacy, critical thinking, and respect for others.

Additional Resources

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The American Civil Liberties Union. "Religion and Public Schools." https://www.aclu.org/issues/religious-liberty/religion-and-public-schools.

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For additional teacher resources, visit the SBL website at: www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx.


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