

Literary Teaching of the Bible

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Can some of you remember the *first* time you ever heard a particular Bible story? I remember being an elementary school child, and my parents read through *The Child's Story Bible* by Catherine Vos for our evening devotions. That was the first time I heard the stories of ALL the judges and kings of Israel, and there were definitely some gross ones! One that stood out to me was Left-handed Ehud, stabbing that obese king, and the dagger getting enclosed by the fat. Whew.

Of course, what happens with your second reading of Ehud, or your third or fourth? It's not *quite* as exciting. And the longer we're a Christian, the more times we read through Scripture, it can become very familiar, perhaps lose its freshness.

I'm not someone who re-reads books or re-watches movies—except in RARE cases—so how do we expect to keep re-reading the same book for YEARS, and keep a sense of freshness about it? I know by young adulthood, I would go through periods feeling that I probably need to focus on PRAYER, because I know the Bible pretty well. I had a very thorough Christian education and had read through the Bible a couple times by college, so I didn't have a lot of motivation for What I'd study next or what I was hoping to gain.

Let me stop to ask YOU all for input: What has helped you personally to refresh your reading of Scripture? Any there any tools or tips you have applied? A resource that has helped?

10 minutes GROUP Discussion:

- (1) Different Translations/Study Bibles—different one each year?
- (2) Reading plans—lectionary connects passages you might not have connected,
- (3) Theology books—give new insight, recapture some of the original meaning we've lost,
- (4) Bible Classes—college/seminary course, historic insights and connections you'd miss,
- (5) Audio—YouTube, sermons, lectures, The Bible Project—add depth.

These are all wonderful ideas. What this demonstrates is that we have—in the English-speaking world at least—SO many resources that can refresh our reading of the Bible.

For me, the *biggest* “a-ha” was grasping that I actually *ought* to have a plan to STUDY—and not just read—the Bible. I think I'd picked up the idea that reading the Bible was about just seeing what jumped out to me from the Holy Spirit. That it didn't necessarily matter *what* I read, or having an order or a plan to it, because it all basically contains a similar message: sin, grace, redemption in Jesus. So I would frequently just flip it open and read haphazardly, because my goal was just to have some experience of sin and grace to re-anchor me for that day. So in terms of a TEXT, I probably thought of the Bible as a set of devotional readings, where the sacred unity of it all sort of overrode everything else.

Now I had a love of academic study and of literature, but I never quite saw the *Bible* as a book of academic or literary complexity, or thought that it would be interesting to study at the same level as what we covered in high school English. I remember studying OTHER ancient texts in class—The Epic of Gilgamesh, Greek plays, some epics— and I thought *they* were really interesting. But I didn't recognize that the Bible is actually of greater literary value, of greater antiquity. I had the opportunity to take Bible

classes but I figured it would just be recapping things I already knew, and I honestly thought that just about any degree sounded more interesting than “Biblical Studies.”

I think this is something we as Bible teachers struggle against: The conception that the Bible is sacred but kind of boring, or I already basically know it, or it’s a book that anyone can read and understand—the Priesthood of all Believers—so why would we need specialized formal education? Isn’t NEW meaning that you find just the result of Your Life and the Text and the Holy Spirit all kind of aligning to teacher you *personally* something new? Now, I don’t want to discount personal pietism at all, because I very much agree that we DO go to the text asking the Holy Spirit to apply the message to my heart, to my life, to show me personal connections.

But when I realized, in seminary, that the Bible is a legitimately fascinating and complex canon that is worthy of the best scholarship—it gave me new energy for Bible STUDY. I realized that I could apply more effort —using skills I already possessed—and I became convinced that study could actually produce greater meaning, greater riches from the text. It undid the myth I already understood the Bible, because I discovered there were parts that I hardly understood at all.

So that is my impetus behind suggesting that high school is the time to begin showing students what they *don’t* know about the text, how much *more* there is to study, how some of their preconceptions are wrong, and I think in some ways, teenagers actually respect the text *more* when they believe that it’s more challenging. I understand the desire to communicate that the Bible is relevant and relatable and easily interpreted, because we *want* students to go read it themselves. But I’ve gotten my MOST positive feedback from times when I made the Bible *foreign*. When I’ve said, “This will NOT match our modern mindset; it may be different than what you expect.” And, some students were unhappy that Bible was no longer an easy A, but everybody was challenged to a new level, and the skeptics, maybe the most so.

We did an OT-NT overview where we used the historic and literary tools that we’ll be talking about today: We delved into the culture and mindset of the Ancient Near East. And I just said up front that this was a very different world, and there’s a lot that offends modern sensibilities: slavery, patriarchy, violence, holy war, lots of hierarchy and inequality. But we did some comparative readings in Ancient Literature, other creation stories and other covenant treaties.

I had them focus more on the narrative and the imagery—connecting motifs of light and dark, and warfare, and serpent, dragon, evil forces—and the point was that the Bible is much more like a saga than like a doctrine textbook. It’s an epic story about kingdoms and warfare, and there some darkness and things that are HARD. But at the end, I asked students to write an essay about the overall unit, and I thought the best compliment was from the student who was most antagonistic toward Christianity. She wrote a thoughtful essay about how this story of two kingdoms addresses hard topics. “I don’t know that I buy it, but it was... a pretty compelling story, and it made sense of evil.” Compared with how caustic she often was, she sounded at least moved and intrigued by the fuller story. And she walked out with at least more respect for the Bible than she had had before, as a text that IS coherent and compelling, though she remained resistant.

Discussion: What do you all think about “relevance” and “difference”—Have you felt that tension that I’ve sometimes felt?

I don't think students are turned off by the "gap" between their world and the world of the text. If anything, it makes the story more intriguing! All the most popular youth fiction is set in *other* times & places, and in alternate worlds (Harry Potter, Hunger Games, you name it). Even the show *Stranger Things* *could* have been set in the modern world, but they chose to set it back in the 80's. Because a *different* world holds a lot of intrigue. And these fictional stories are very formative for our students, even though they're not "relevant."

Today, more than ever, students need to be grounded in understanding WHAT kind of text the Bible is. If they float through thinking that it's a set of moral teachings or devotional readings—and they don't understand its historicity, its literary weight, the number of copies and manuscripts, the grounding in real space-and-time—it becomes much easier to substitute one "Chicken soup for the soul" for another. The amount of inspirational quotes I see on Facebook that are semi-Christian, semi-therapeutic is amazing. Secularism with a sprinkling of spirituality is a strong pull—and I don't see how "nuggets of encouragement" is going to be a compelling defense of orthodox Christianity.

It was a driving impulse for THIS museum to know that a growing number of Americans don't have basic literacy of what kind of text the Bible is. It used to be the case that Americans who weren't even practicing Christians still had vague respect for the Bible, calling it a sacred text or a moral guide. And they were aware of the larger stories in the Bible. But you may have seen studies by the Barna Research Group showing how millennials are less knowledgeable and more skeptical of the Bible. They have more negative perceptions of it, and 6 in 10 non-Christian young people have never read it at all. ([link](#)) This museum is devoted to asking visitors to set aside for a moment their preconceptions about the Bible and to examine the historic impact and weight of Scripture.

The more we equip our students with an understanding of Scripture's literary and historic, the better they will be able to inform a post-Christian culture. This means that study across the disciplines all matters! The more that our literature and language studies are strong as a school, the more our biblical studies will benefit, too. Do we read ancient texts elsewhere in the curriculum? ...study poetry of various forms? Teaching good reading skills in English class will help students do a close reading of Scripture, listening for the author's repeated emphases, keeping genre in mind, and even unify the narrative through seeing recurring motifs.*

(*This may require the help of outside resources. Just as we need film critics to point out the motifs in an Academy Award winning movie, and just as we need literary critics to point out the 'motif of light and dark' in a Pulitzer Prize winning play, so we need biblical scholars to point out motifs that we would otherwise miss. This is partly because the recurring words are more apparent in the original language than they are in the English. Motifs are what make books worth re-reading and films worth re-watching. They are threads throughout the story that tie the story together—instances where the meaning is not stated so much as *shown*. Finding motifs is something of a science and an art. Motifs in Scripture that may be missed are images like:

- Serpent & Dragon
- Curse vs. Rest
- Seed of the woman
- Tree beside a River

James Hamilton writes that Jesus picks up all these threads of plot line, and they are woven together in him: He is the seed of the woman who will crush the serpent, reverse the curse and bring us rest. (Hamilton, *What is Biblical Theology?*)

If we unify the most repeated motifs into mega-motifs, this is how we arrive at a “Big Story” of Scripture that is artistic and imaginative, not just a chronology of events. THIS will engage head, heart, hands. We feel the pull and desire to be a part of the story, acting our own lives in line with the drama (Wells – *Improvisation*). See also James K.A. Smith on “schooling the imagination” in Christian living and tying ethics back to the story-of-God.

I’d love to hear you share your own practices in helping students in 3 areas:

- (1) ...Grasp the historicity of the Bible (*sense the gap between us and the ancient world; God set this story in a different time and place; and that’s actually GOOD; help them grasp the ancient world better*)
- (2) ...Read & Apply the tools of language arts (*reading skills, genre, interpretation, etc.*)
- (3) ...Connect themes between books (*unifying the narrative*)