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David Levenson is a University Distinguished Teaching Professor at Florida State University, where he has been a member of the Religion Department since 1976. He teaches ancient Judaism, Christianity, and other Greek and Roman Religions, as well as Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic languages. His primary research interest is Jewish-Christian relations in Antiquity. In addition to his recent involvement in teaching about the Bible in public schools, he is an active participant in an ongoing national project on the teaching of Biblical Hebrew, sponsored by the Wabash Institute for Teaching and Learning. Of particular relevance to some of the issues addressed here, is his article, "Different Texts or Different Quests? The Contexts of Biblical Studies," in Hebrew Bible or Old Testament: Studying the Bible in Judaism and Christianity, ed. Roger Brooks and J.J. Collins (Notre Dame Press, 1990), 153-164.

Background

The Florida State University (FSU) Religion Department became involved in the issue of teaching about the Bible in public schools in the Winter of 2000, when the Florida Department of Education asked us to review the guidelines for two courses that were part of the state curriculum: Bible History: Old Testament and Bible History: New Testament. There have been approved Bible courses in the Florida public schools for many years, but their constitutionality had been recently challenged by two events: a bitterly divisive battle in Lee County over the appropriate Bible curriculum to be adopted, and a report from the People for the American Way, *The Good Book Taught Wrong: 'Bible History' Classes in Florida's Public Schools*. This report claimed there were significant constitutional problems with the Bible courses in all the school districts in which they were being taught.

The Lee County Bible Curriculum

In March, 1996, the Lee County School Board (Ft. Myers) authorized the teaching of a two-semester Bible history sequence, Bible History: Old Testament, and Bible History: New

Testament. Both courses were listed in the state curriculum as social studies elective courses. Since the state provided only brief general guidelines and specific curriculum decisions were left to local school boards, a fifteen-member “Bible Curriculum Committee” was formed to develop a curriculum to be submitted to a vote of the five member School Board.

After a year and a half of contentious committee meetings focusing on both legal and content issues, the school board voted 3-2 in August, 1997, to adopt a Bible History I (Old Testament) curriculum. A Bible History II (New Testament) curriculum was adopted by the same margin in October. The first course was scheduled to begin in January, 1998, and the second in March. Opponents of the two courses, among whom were the ACLU and the People for the American Way, then sued the school board in Federal District Court, seeking a preliminary injunction to keep the courses from being taught. Among those supporting the school board were the conservative American Center for Law and Justice, and the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools.

The judge ruled in January that the Old Testament course could be offered, but should be monitored closely (even taped) by the plaintiffs to insure that it be “taught in a permissibly objective manner” and not as a “veiled attempt to promote Christianity in the guise of teaching history.”¹ She granted the injunction against the teaching of the New Testament course, which, against the advice of the school board’s attorney, was based entirely on the curriculum of the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools. The board agreed to settle the case by adopting a curriculum for both courses based on an introductory college-level textbook.

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The school district required those planning to teach the course to take an intensive course given by Mitchell Reddish, of Stetson University — one of the authors of the textbook.

People for the American Way: “The Good Book Taught Wrong”

The request to review the guidelines for the Bible History courses came to our department chair, John Kelsay, from the Florida Department of Education in January, 2000, shortly after the People for the American Way released a sixty-page report severely critical of the way Bible History courses were being taught throughout the state.

The report, entitled *The Good Book Taught Wrong: ‘Bible History’ Classes in Florida Public Schools*,³ was based on instructional materials obtained under the Florida Public Records Act from fourteen of the fifteen school districts that had taught one or both of the Bible History courses during the academic years 1996-97, 1997-98, and 1998-1999. The request included, “lesson plans, exams, reading lists and assignments, as well as identification

of all books, videos and similar instructional materials, and everything else given to or shown to students”⁴

The report argued that, “the courses are framed and taught from Christian perspectives”; “the Bible is used as a history textbook”; “students are assumed to be Christian and the Bible is taught accordingly”; “the Bible is used to promote Christian faith formation and religious values and lessons”; and “Sunday school and other religious training exercises are used to indoctrinate students in Bible content”⁵

Highlighted in the report and in the press coverage of its release were such exam questions as, “If you had a Jewish friend who wanted to know if Jesus might be the expectant [sic] Messiah, which book [of the Gospels] would you give him?” and, “Why is it hard for a non-Christian to understand things about God?”⁶ Perhaps the item that received the most public attention was a question and answer from a lesson plan on John 8: “Who, according to Jesus, is the father of the Jews? The devil.”⁷

While recognizing the appropriateness of teaching about the Bible from a non-sectarian perspective, especially as a work of literature and in the context of comparative religion classes, the report recommended the removal of both Bible History courses from the state-approved course list.⁸

Developing New Guidelines

Citing state statutes that permit school districts to offer courses dealing with the “objective study of the Bible and religion,”⁹ the General Counsel for the Department of Education asked the FSU Religion Department to review and make suggestions regarding “the title, subject area and substantive content” of the 1992 state course descriptions that serve as the guidelines for the courses developed by individual school districts.

The task was assigned to my colleague Shannon Burkes and me, the two members of the department who have the primary responsibility for teaching our introductory Bible courses. Robert Spivey, a former Religion Department chair, Dean of Arts and Sciences, and Executive Director of the American Academy of Religion, who had recently returned to the FSU administration, joined us. He brought his expertise as the co-author of a widely used New Testament textbook, and as a former director of a national project for teaching about religion in the public schools, which was developed at FSU in the early ‘70s.

At our first of several meetings with representatives from the Department of Education, there was general agreement that the 1992 curriculum frameworks needed revision. The guidelines for the two courses were brief and general, consisting of a single-sentence course description and short lists of contents and “intended outcomes.” The primary emphasis on “understanding the Bible as a historical document” demanded more training than the teachers were likely to have. To the extent that this was interpreted as evaluating the historicity of the biblical accounts (“archaeological evidence and Biblical studies” is listed among the short list of topics for both courses), it introduced one of the most complex and debated aspects of contemporary biblical scholarship: one which could easily lead to attempts to prove or disprove particular religious claims.

We quickly agreed that emphasizing literary rather than historical issues made the most sense for high school teachers and students. Such a suggestion was also made in the report of the People for the American Way, and in *The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide*, a pamphlet published by the National Bible Association and the First Amendment Center and endorsed by a wide range of organizations from a variety of perspectives (including Council on Islamic Education, Anti-Defamation League, National Association of Evangelicals, the Christian Legal Society, the People for the American Way Foundation).

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What neither of these documents points out, however, is that a focus on literary analysis also has the advantage of reflecting the most recent developments in contemporary biblical scholarship.

While recommending a focus on literary analysis, we did not believe that biblical literature could or should be taught in isolation from history. Questions of date and authorship of the documents, the appearance of historical events described in so many biblical narratives and assumed in so much biblical poetry, and the history of the interpretation of the text, beginning with the history of the text, canon, and translations, are all topics that cannot be avoided by even mildly curious and casual readers.

The guidelines we developed, therefore, while clearly emphasizing literary questions, also include historical issues surrounding the understanding of the literature. They quite definitely and intentionally do not include evaluation of the historicity of specific events, however.¹¹

In order to signal the move from a more historical to a more literary approach, we recommended that the subject area be moved from social studies to humanities. While language arts would

also have been a possible area for the Bible courses, we thought that placing them in the humanities area would suggest the interdisciplinary nature of such a course, which would bring in material and approaches from history and the fine arts as well as literature.

The name of the courses was controversial, as “Old Testament” and “New Testament” were clearly Christian categories. “Hebrew Bible,” or “Hebrew Scripture” was not precise either, since that would not include the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical Books. Our suggestion that courses be designated Bible I: Literature of Ancient Israel, and Bible II: Literature of Early Christianity, was evidently seen as too clumsy or pedantic, so the Department of Education decided to use simply Introduction to the Bible I, and Introduction to the Bible II.

Announcement of New Guidelines

Tom Gallagher, the then Commissioner of Education, announced the new guidelines at a press conference on March, 16, 2000. Pointing to a large chart listing the concerns and the specific response by the Department of Education (e.g. “taught as history”/ ”teach as humanities”), he stated, “By law, school districts have the right to teach the objective study of the Bible. The Department has taken steps to ensure that right.” The last of the four major concerns listed was “lack of teacher training,” to which the response was the creation of a “Technical Assistance Summer Institute.”

Summer Institutes

Clearly, the greatest problem associated with teaching about the Bible in the public schools is the lack of teachers trained in the academic study of the Bible. The plan to provide summer institutes is at best a stop-gap measure, while specific standards are being established which must include at least some work in Bible at the College level. While we suggested that the first summer be spent planning a full-scale institute for the next summer, the Department of Education wanted some teacher training in both legal and content issues to be offered during the summer of 2000. The FSU Religion Department, Department of Educational Leadership, and Center for Professional Development, together with the Florida Department of Education offered a two-day “Technical Assistance Workshop” for thirty teachers and administrators in July.

July 13-14, 2000

The first day of the institute was taken up with an overview of the teaching of Bible in Florida. A

panel of administrators discussed issues connected with the implementation of Bible courses. A panel of legal experts was organized by Joseph Beckham, chair of the FSU Department of Educational Leadership and the coauthor of *A Legal Guide for Florida Teachers*.¹² The panel on legal issues included a lengthy discussion of the Lee County case, presented by Keith Martin, the lawyer for the School Board, who during the law suit found himself in the uncomfortable position of defending the actions of the Board that had rejected his advice on a number of key issues.

Shannon Burkes and I led an informal discussion with the teachers on the evening of the first day, and spent the entire second day presenting as much material as we could. For the evening session, we planned to moderate a discussion in which the teachers would exchange information about what had and had not worked in the classroom. This would also give us an opportunity to learn about their own training, interests, and needs.

It quickly became apparent that a number of the teachers were hesitant to talk freely about their experiences in the classroom because they believed that they had been unfairly maligned by the report from the People for the American Way, and not supported by the state Department of Education. They felt that they had worked hard to develop a non-sectarian course, that the report gave them no credit for this, and unfairly used a few egregious examples to paint all of them as religious bigots.

One teacher — one of the very few about whom the report said anything positive — was particularly incensed. She felt she had spent an inordinate amount of time developing an academically responsible Bible elective course (including attending seminars and lecture tours sponsored by the Biblical Archaeology Society), and was rewarded with finding herself criticized in the report and harassed by reporters.

She had a point. The report cites her attempt to distinguish two aspects of Bible History as “the history that happened during Bible times” and “the history of how we got the Bible,” and then suggests that the first aspect “appears to contravene the school district’s guideline that the Bible will not be ‘referred to as a factual document.’” She is also criticized for a test question asking for identification of the man who, “actually led the Jewish people into the Promised Land.” The objection was evidently on the grounds that this assumes the historical accuracy of the text. Similarly, course materials that contain such “Sunday school type tasks” as asking students to list the twenty-seven books of the New Testament in correct order are cited.¹³ This is part of a general criticism that runs throughout the report, that any “exercises that emphasize rote memorization rather than critical thinking or analysis skills” are indicative of a Sunday school approach and are therefore inappropriate.

While the report sometimes does go too far in pressing its case, it should not be forgotten that the People for the American Way Foundation has played an invaluable role in carefully monitoring for inappropriate and unconstitutional materials and practices, and supplying the legal resources to prevent abuses. The interpretation of the data in the report should not, of course, be accepted uncritically. At the same time, without the report, it is not clear how long it would have taken before the state of Florida recognized the problems with the way Bible History classes were being taught.

As soon as the teachers and administrators realized that we were there to help them rather than gather evidence against them, they opened up considerably. Throughout the second day, they remained interested and excited by the discussion of the methods of contemporary Biblical studies and their application to specific texts.

June 12-15, 2001

The second summer institute, for which Corrine Patton (University of St. Thomas), and I were the primary instructors, featured only a half day of discussion of legal issues, including a case study approach led by Joseph Beckham. Three full days and evenings were devoted to issues connected with the content of the courses. As in the first summer program, our goal was not simply to present material the teachers could take directly into the classroom, but to provide background that would give them a deeper understanding of the methods and results of historical/literary criticism of the Bible. While the first institute drew administrators and teachers, the second had almost entirely teachers. Five teachers and one administrator who attended the first session participated in the second as well.

With more time we were able to expand our treatment of canon, text, and translation by including exercises comparing the endings of Mark, and different translations of several Psalms. Our surveys of Ancient Near Eastern, Jewish, and Graeco-Roman literature could also devote more time to looking at primary texts.

As was the case with the first summer's program, we decided to focus on a limited number of Biblical texts in order to illustrate the variety of methods that can be used in approaching the

material. In summer 2000, Shannon Burkes had discussed literary approaches to the David narratives. In summer 2001, Corrine Patton used the Abraham cycle to illustrate narrative approaches and social history. One of the liveliest sessions — which we did not predict — was the group exercise she led focusing on identifying prophetic forms in Amos. Not only did the teachers seem to enjoy learning about the importance of taking into account literary forms and genres in understanding biblical poetry, they also thought the exercise would work well in their own classrooms. The last section was devoted to the Hebrew Bible focused on Genesis 1-3, and provided an opportunity to look at a number of traditional religious and modern academic approaches to a text.

While I spent part of the last day suggesting some ways of approaching Paul, almost all of the discussion of New Testament texts was devoted to the Synoptic Gospels. We spent half a day on a literary analysis of the Gospel of Mark, with some discussion of how an understanding of the first century context, especially persecution and apocalypticism, could contribute to a fuller appreciation of the literary structure and religious themes of the text. During the last session, I worked through the Synoptic Problem with them, stressing both the importance of careful observation and collection of data, and the fact that the same data have been used since antiquity to support a number of different hypotheses. I also emphasized that, for the students, the main purpose of careful comparison of passages from the Synoptic Gospels is not to gain an understanding of the Synoptic problem, but to highlight the distinctive literary techniques and religious themes of each gospel.

When the Department of Education first raised the topic of the summer institutes, I had significant doubts. I was concerned that they would prove to be a superficial substitute for the sort of minimal training that should be required of anyone teaching Bible in the public schools. Reflecting on the past two summer institutes, however, I have a much more positive view of what they can accomplish. Nothing, of course, can substitute for a series of semester-long advanced undergraduate and graduate courses. A few of the teachers did have that sort of training. While most did not, they still were able to learn in a few intense days, much more about the methods and substantive issues than I would have thought possible. A number of factors could explain this. We were working with a self-selected group who had made the decision to attend the institute because they recognized what they could gain from interaction with biblical scholars. They were highly motivated to learn as much as possible, both to satisfy their intellectual curiosity and to acquire the analytical skills and information to bring to the classroom.

While I am confident that most of the teachers who attended the institute wanted to teach the Bible courses because of their importance to them personally, all of them appeared genuinely concerned to teach in a non-sectarian, academically respectable, and fully constitutional way. In the discussions of legal issues, they wanted as many specific guidelines as possible, and

consistently wanted to err in the direction of caution. As a whole, the two groups were very impressive. The institutes have been among the most satisfying teaching experiences I have had in my twenty-six years teaching New Testament at FSU.

I have no way of knowing how typical the participants in the institutes were of those teaching the Bible courses. The report from the People for the American Way provides substantial evidence that there were many less sensitive and less competent teachers. Perhaps if the institutes continue and are required by the state, at least for those who have not done college-level work in the area, I will get a more representative sample and be in a better position to evaluate whether this experiment can work.

Clearly, the Bible will continue to be taught in public schools and must continue to be monitored carefully by organizations such as the People for the American Way. *The Good Book Taught Wrong*, with all of its faults, should be read by everyone dealing with the topic. *The Bible and the Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide* provides a wonderfully clear starting point for any discussion of why and how a Bible course should be taught in the public schools.

What has been missing in the current discussion, however, is the participation of biblical scholars. Though not always familiar with the special problems associated with high school introduction to Bible courses, we have for many years been thinking about how to introduce non-sectarian analysis of the Bible to students from a variety of backgrounds in public educational institutions. For those actually engaged in teaching about the Bible in public institutions, programmatic statements and legal advice about how the Bible should or should not be taught are of limited value. The immediate questions are not how to teach about the Bible in general, but how to present specific topics in an interesting and appropriate way. It is here that biblical scholars are uniquely qualified, both by their academic training and by their teaching experience, to contribute to the discussion.

The following concluding reflections on several key questions addressed in both *The Bible in Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide* and *The Good Book Taught Wrong* are meant to serve as examples of how the perspective of those who spend their careers teaching Bible in colleges and universities might be helpful to those thinking about the best way to teach the Bible in public schools.

Which Bible?

Among the most prominent problems identified in the content of public school Bible courses are questions of canon, translations, and use of the term, “Old Testament.” Properly handled, however, these can be among the least controversial topics in the course. Unlike questions of date, authorship, historical reconstruction, theological emphases, and literary analysis, they can be addressed using a straightforward descriptive approach that can be easily accessible to high school students.

A survey of the most important documents in the history of canon formation, and a description and comparison of the canons of contemporary communities, should be presented in the first unit of any Bible class. In addition, selections of literature not considered canonical by Jews and Protestants should be read either in connection with the discussion of canon or, perhaps better, discussed along with works of similar genre later in the course.

Although it might, at first glance, seem to involve overly complicated and religiously controversial questions, many aspects of textual criticism can be easily and appropriately treated in high school. Looking at pictures of ancient and medieval manuscripts, comparing major textual variants such as the endings of Mark, and learning about the Dead Sea Scrolls can be interesting class projects, for which there are abundant and inexpensive video and Web resources.

The question of which translation to use need not be as controversial as most of those writing on this subject seem to think. Comparison of a variety of translations is an obvious and essential class project, simplified considerably by Web resources. As long as students have discussed questions of canon and text, have understood the fact that the content and order of the books differ among various communities, and have compared the same selections from different translations, there need not be a great problem if one particular translation is used by most students. After all, it is differences in translation philosophy (e.g. “dynamic equivalence” versus “formal equivalence” translations), rather than in theology that account for all but a very few of the differences among modern translations.

The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide suggests that, “a biblical source book that includes key texts of each of the major Bibles or an anthology of various translations” might be better than adopting one particular Bible.

While such a book would be a valuable resource, the selection process, in effect, creates another canon. Perhaps more significantly, it also limits the possibility of the sort of wide ranging comparison among texts from different parts of the Bible that is essential for any literary or historiographic analysis.

It is easier to recognize the problem with the use of the term “Old Testament,” than it is to come up with a convenient alternative. “Hebrew Bible,” “Jewish Scriptures,” and “Tanakh” are all problematic in that they exclude the Apocrypha, or Deuterocanonical books. The important point is to explain the issue and introduce the terms used by the different communities, rather than to insist that only one term be used.

Whose Interpretation?

The Bible in Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide sensibly suggests that, “[b]ecause there are many ways to interpret the Bible — religious and secular — public school teachers should expose students to a variety of interpretations.” Implementing the suggestion, however, can be problematic. As the document goes on to say, this is especially fraught if teachers, after allowing “students to encounter the text directly...draw on the resources of different religious and secular interpretative traditions for understanding it.”

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Most public school teachers and, in fact, many biblical scholars, are not adequately prepared to explain how various religious traditions might interpret a biblical text. Generalizing about “Jewish” or “Catholic” interpretations of particular passages, for example, could easily lead to a distorted impression and encourage students to attack or defend an interpretation based on religious commitments. I found particularly helpful the suggestion my colleague Corrine Patton made during last summer’s institute. She proposed that instead of referring to Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, or Jewish interpretations, teachers should introduce the history of the biblical interpretation by using specific examples and attributing them to specific individuals or texts. A comparative religion class seems to be a much better place for an extensive discussion of how different traditions might interpret the Bible, since the interpretation can be placed within the context of particular communities’ beliefs, practices and institutions.

Literary and Historical Approaches

While historical background, history of interpretation and the role the Bible has played in Western culture should be discussed at some point, surely the main goal of a Bible course should be to read the text closely and carefully. For this, literary analysis offers the best approach. Discussions of plot, characterization, generic conventions, and so on, can provide a

critical distance that allows students from a number of different religious or non-religious perspectives to read the text together. The introduction of some historical context, however, is particularly helpful in encouraging students to imagine how ancient Israelites or early Christians might have read the text. Such a contextual reading also offers the possibility of a critical distance that does not demand or privilege specific religious commitments. Asking what a particular New Testament text might have meant to first-century Christians is one way of providing equal interpretive access to Christian and non-Christian students alike.

While discussion of the historicity of particular events might easily be avoided by focusing on literary structures and the range of meanings the text might have had for particular communities, at some point questions of date, authorship, and sources are bound to arise. Here it is important to provide students with a range of opinions and some sense of the evidence on which they are based. Dogmatic assertions should be avoided, not only because they might offend the religious sensibilities of some students, but also because the evidence for most of these questions is hardly conclusive, and the tools for evaluating the evidence are not easily accessible to high school students or their teachers.

Endnotes

¹ *Gibson v. Lee County School Board*, 1 F. Supp. 2d 1434 (M.D. Fla. 1998).

² Beasley, James R., Clyde E. Fant, E. Earl Joiner, Donald W. Musser, and Mitchell G. Reddish. *An Introduction to the Bible*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

³ Schaeffer, Judith E., and Elliot M. Minberg. *The Good Book Taught Wrong: 'Bible History' Classes in Florida's Public Schools* . (Washington: People for the American Way Foundation, January 2000). Also at www.pfaw.org/issues/liberty/florida-bible.shtml

⁴ Schaeffer and Minberg, *The Good Book*, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁹ 233.0612, F.S. and 233.062, F.S.

¹⁰ *The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide* (Nashville: First Amendment Center, 1999). For online text and related information about the document, see <http://www.teachaboutthebible.org/>

¹¹ The complete course descriptions and guidelines are available at [Introduction to the Bible I](#) and [Introduction to the Bible II](#)

¹² This volume includes the chapter, "Religious Neutrality and Free Exercise of Religion."

Schaeffer and Mincberg, *The Good Book*, 31-32.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1; cf. 11-12. Another area where the report seems problematic is in its criticism of the use of books published by presses with some religious connection, including not just Paulist, Zondervan, Hendrickson, and Eerdmans, but Harper San Francisco, whose Web site states that it publishes, "Inspired books for mind, body and soul" (57).

¹⁵ *The Bible and Public Schools*, 6.

¹⁶ Ibid.