
The effort of G. Brooke Lester (Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois), with Jane S. Webster (Barton College in Wilson, North Carolina) and
Christopher M. Jones (Beloit College in Beloit, Wisconsin) to provide seminary and liberal arts instructors with ways to assign and redesign their biblical and religious courses is distinguished by a dual accomplishment. First, a substantial critique of traditional class syllabi and offerings evaluates significant literary and redaction issues; offers techniques for effective teaching regarding the nature of text, context, and intertext; and underscores that multiple approaches mirror best the ambiance of a given class. Second, providing specific ways to manage "big ideas and essential questions" encourages the instructor to interact with innovative pedagogy and methodology applied to traditional course matter and instruction. At first the response may be hesitancy (time involved, fear of change, lesson plans are K-14 not seminary, advanced higher instruction) and frustration. Nonetheless, if one applies scholarly love, dedication, discipline, and determination, obstacles can be overcome. Repetition and continuity build confidence, and the innovative class design will bring students to see the light.

The volume consists of six chapters, four written by Lester and one each by Webster and Jones. There is also an appendix containing six rubrics associated with the chapters and the sample template for the essay on NT is contained therein. The bedrock of this teaching guide is Grant P. Wiggins and Jay McTighe, Understanding by Design (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998; expanded 2nd ed., 2005); and Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design: Professional Development Workbook (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2004). Lester is incisive about what Understanding by Design (UbD) is all about. In chap. 1, he defines its learner-centered approach as beginning with desired end results (learning objectives) and then working back to a beginning premise and outline. In chap. 2, L. interacts with Wiggins and McTighe's opus by viewing their curricula by design through biblical lenses. Determining acceptable evidence and transparency in assessment and evaluation are important. In chap. 3, L. applies UbD to the Hebrew Scriptures, and he points out that Instructor-Student-School-Creed data affect course objectives to varying degrees. One may hit students with Forbidden Questions (e.g., JEDP and singular author-editor) to innovate class learning. Relevant issues include secular biblical criticism and also OT in NT design are welcomed in Christian seminaries (rarely, if at all, in rabbinic institutions with the possible exception of a Messianic Jewish seminary). In chap. 4, L. adapts UbD to online learning. Major concerns include creating a learner profile and a conducive Internet classroom, including class objectives, tools, resources, and assessment.

In chap. 5, W. discusses UbD in relation to NT content classes taught in liberal arts colleges. Engendering understandings for a more diversified group of students than the seminary provides different challenges and assessments. Beyond factual ingathering there are pertinent meta-questions (e.g., Last Supper a Passover Seder?), and class goals are enhanced by learning to write and writing to learn.

In chap. 6, J. presents and evaluates his experiences in teaching two classes via UbD, "Ritual and Ritualization" and "Space and Place in early Judaism" at Beloit College. An appendix containing rubrics evaluating class design and activity, student participation and evaluation concludes the volume.

How biblical matter is taught depends, in no small measure, on what it is conceived to be, and the basic conception of biblical exegesis and thematic related issues is established through its academically disciplined study. For several generations, accordingly, the pre-
vailing norms for the academic study and teaching of Scriptures have been dictated by the classical tradition of biblical criticism, flourishing on a groundwork of giants of nineteenth-century historical scholarship. This tradition has been well perpetuated in the United States in secular schools and associations of higher learning and at times in parochial schools (e.g., JEDP will not substitute for HaShem in institutions of Jewish Orthodoxy, nor would the Jesus of history disconnect from the Christ of faith in Catholic and Christian [fundamentalist] schools and seminaries). Respecting institutional guidelines should not preclude an instructor’s responsibility to work creatively and diligently at presenting a meaningful teaching experience. UbD philosophy is on this track and the experiential know-how of L., W., and J. assures a successful biblical course (general and thematic) model for both novice and veteran teachers in the field.

A personal note. Though I acknowledge the authors’ enthusiasm for UbD, I prefer the traditional methods in teaching the Hebrew canon, NT, and rabbinics. I use a historical-critical method that stresses that two-millennia-old Jewish texts and related literature are engaging diversified Judaism (religion) as an interpretation of ethnicity in the context of the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman era. I limit the straight lecture approach, preferring student encounter, not encroachment ambience.

By encouraging the student to do research at home in order to explicate the text in class and answer questions of difficulty from a peer group, one plants in the students seeds of loyalty to great concepts, which otherwise would not grow from the total lecture method that often detaches the student from the material—nor, it appears, from the “hands on-feel good” tanai (condition/premise) related to the UbD model of personal relevancy. Furthermore, the student gains self-reliance from such an exposure; his or her own germane ideas are able to sprout; and a relaxed teacher–student relationship is created.

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