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"Say Bible!": Teaching Biblical Reception

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Classes focused on biblical reception might seem to some like a "get out of jail" card in the face of ever-threatening questions about the relevance of biblical studies today. To others, such classes look like a cul-de-sac that fails to lead to either renewed interest in the Bible or meaningful pedagogical outcomes. In this short reflection, I would like to tease out chances and challenges that come with teaching biblical reception. These reflections are based on my experience of teaching a range of courses in biblical reception in a UK higher education context over the course of about eight years. As Ika Willis has pointed out, reception studies can involve examination of the "real-life practices of historical and contemporary readers and audiences," "the many different things that people *do* with texts" and "the afterlives of texts or the history of their effects."[1] It involves us in "big questions about the nature of interpretation, language and meaning, as well as questions about the relationship between texts and contexts."[2] In this article, I argue that the significance of teaching biblical reception lies in the opportunities for addressing key issues of societal significance,[3] for honing hermeneutical

[1] Ika Willis, *Reception* (London: Routledge, 2018), 2. Willis' book provides an excellent overview of different theories and approaches to reception studies, where she draws from different disciplines in the Humanities.

[2] Willis, *Reception*, 2.

[3] Mikael Larsson and Hanna Liljefors also make the case for the social significance of biblical reception in their article, "Att undervisa om 'Bibeln i politiken': Fallgropar och möjligheter," *SEÅ* 87 (2022): 120–140; see also Göran Eidevall, "Tio år senare: Tankar om bibelvetenskapens framtid – Avskedsföreläsning 10 november 2022," *SEÅ* 88

skills, and the ample possibilities for interactive student-centred learning. The purpose of teaching biblical reception is to demontstrate the multiple and varied uses to which biblical texts are (and have been) put, and thereby to elucidate the impact of these texts on everything from conceptions of nature, race, gender, and sexuality, to political visions, cultural production, linguistic trends, and apocalyptic imaginaries.

Biblical Reception in Secular Society

The term "biblical reception" can be used capaciously to include any and all teaching on the influence and impact of the Bible, but in my own teaching I have focused on this influence and impact in Western contexts. Primarily, this teaching has addressed interpretations and uses of the Bible in spheres that are perceived to be secular, such as culture (films, TV, art, literature, music, architecture), media (traditional and social), and politics (parliamentary debates, biographies, speeches, movements, manifestos, protests). In other words, my main emphasis has not been on teaching how the Bible has been used and interpreted by faith communities over time. That is not, of course, because I do not think this is important and could not be the central focus. The point, however, is that focusing on so-called secular spheres reveals the more surprising and unexpected ways biblical texts have been important and influential. Learning about this kind of biblical reception allows students to look anew at both faith contexts and non-faith contexts, with an eye to the scope of biblical reception and the plasticity of these texts in their history of usage and interpretation.

Classes that focus first and foremost on the presence of the Bible in culture, media, and politics can address major debates and significant

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(2023): 91–105, and David Davage, "Kan Gamla testamentet bli som nytt? Exegetisk undervisning i skuggan av ett 'döende testamente'," in *Teologisk utbildning*, ed. Thomas Girmalm (Umeå: Umeå universitet, 2020), 101–130.

societal issues taking place at a given time. As many scholars have been pointing out, at least since José Casanova's influential *Public Religions in the Modern World* in the 1990s,[4] religion is all over our screens, in our headlines, and public squares. Classes in biblical reception, then, provide ample opportunity for engaging with the continuous and changing significance of religion in society, but also with key societal issues more generally. In a Swedish context, a starting point for discussing the significance of scripture with students could be to address the way Qur'ans have become highly symbolic and materially important objects in recent times, particularly in far-right protests that desecrate Islamic sacred scripture.[5] The Bible, on the other hand, does not seem to feature in the same way in public squares across Europe. At least not at first glance. If we prompt students to look closer, protests in which Bibles have been doled out to worshipping Muslims or in which quotes from the Bible are found on placards have in fact been part of wider European far-right trends.[6] There are fascinating cases where the Bible has in recent times been perceived as desecrated and in need of protection from the public

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[4] Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[5] Much has been written on these desecrations in the media. For a brief and accessible overview of key issues that puts the desecrations in a larger context, see Piero S. Colla, "In Sweden, Burning Qur'ans Threaten to Send the Country's History of Tolerance Up in Smoke," *The Conversation*, 10 January 2024 (https://theconversation.com/in-sweden-burning-qurans-threaten-to-send-the-countrys-history-of-tolerance-up-in-smoke-220649. When discussing these kinds of cases, it is important to make clear that much use of scripture does not make headlines. That does not mean we should not strive to know about these other uses that go otherwise under the radar. For a discussion of the materiality of the Qur'an that is not about desecration, see for instance Katharina Wilkens, "Embodying the Qur'an," in *Books and Bodies and as Sacred Beings*, eds. James W. Watts and Yohan Yoo (Sheffield: Equinox, 2021), 25–35.

[6] For a discussion of such trends, see Hannah Strømmen, "Scripts and Scriptures of Populism: On Populist Reading Practices," in *The Spirit of Populism: Political Theologies in Polarized Times*, eds. Ulrich Schmiedel and Joshua Ralston (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 85–100.

that classes on biblical reception can make visible.[7] Classes in biblical reception can investigate where Bibles operate in contemporary society, from biblical monuments and architecture around the globe,[8] to their presence or absence in ceremonies and courts of law,[9] to the repeated invocations of the Bible by the Kardashians ("say Bible!") in their hugely popular reality shows.[10] While part of the pedagogical point might be to discuss the fact *that* a biblical text is cited, the valuable questions for meaningful pedagogical outcomes are: what, how, why, and to what effect, is a biblical text cited?

Addressing such questions, classes in biblical reception can ask to what effect the Bible is glossed as a "favourite book" by politicians such as Donald Trump,[11] or presented as a victim of political weaponization

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[7] See Yvonne Sherwood, *Biblical Blaspheming: Trials of the Sacred for a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), particularly chapter one, "The Persistence of Blasphemy: The Bible as a Public Edifice in the 'Secular' State," 9–95.

[8] See James S. Bielo, *Materializing the Bible: Scripture, Sensation, Place* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

[9] See Hugh S. Pyper, "The Absent Bible: Oaths of Office in Scotland and the United States," in *Challenging Contextuality: Bibles and Biblical Scholarship in Context*, eds. Louise Lawrence, Peter-Ben Smit, Hannah Strømmen, and Charlene Van der Walt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2024).

[10] I have yet to find any academic literature on this phenomenon but commentators have picked up on this peculiarity of the Kardashians. Steph Osmanski, "Bible, OKURR!, and More – Learn How to Speak Like a Kardashian With This KarJenner Language Guide," *Life and Style Magazine*, 5 November 2017 (https://www.lifeandstylemag.com/posts/kardashian-slang-words-146029/#).

[11] Julia Mourão Permoser, "Trump, the Bible, and the Far Right's Use of Religion," *Berkley Forum*, 26 June 2020 (https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/trump-the-bible-and-the-far-right-s-use-of-religion). For a broader context on US politics and the Bible, see Jacques Berlinerblau, *Thumpin' it: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in Today's Presidential Politics* (Louisville: John Knox, 2007), and more recently, Jason von Ehrenkrook, "The Inaugural Bible: Presidential Rhetoric and the Politics of Scripture," *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 7/2 (2020): 205–240. To add to earlier statements, Trump is now being reported as selling Bibles (Jill Colvan and the Associated Press, "Cash-Crunched Trump Is Selling Patriotic Bibles Online for $59.99 Each," *Fortune*, 27 March

by Alexandria Occasio Cortez.[12] Such classes can make sense of the way biblical references to the Good Samaritan recur in seemingly unexpected places, such as parliamentary debates.[13] And they can explore why Moses is often depicted in paintings with horns.[14] Such classes can critically scrutinize the way certain parts of the Bible are frequently cited while others are almost completely neglected and forgotten (parallels could be drawn with the Qur'an).[15] These cases can grapple with recognizable issues that surround students in their daily life, or they can be highlighted for students in ways that immediately display their relevance as the cases of biblical reception feature in the public and so-called secular sphere. In many ways, teaching biblical reception can be downright fun. Watching how Lady Gaga reimagines Judas and Jesus musically and visually is entertaining, as is making sense of new apps that allow users to chat to biblical figures.[16] This sense of fun should not obscure the fact

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2024 (https://fortune.com/2024/03/26/donald-trump-selling-bibles-for-59-99/).

[12] During a House Oversight Committee meeting in 2020, Democratic politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez made an impassioned speech that critiqued the way advocates for religious liberty were "weaponizing" the Bible to "justify bigotry," in a similar way to "those who justified slavery" (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Upa2Rk_Y1Z0).

[13] See for instance, Nick Spencer, *The Political Samaritan: How Power Hijacked a Parable* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

[14] See Ruth W. Melinkoff, *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art and Thought* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1997).

[15] This kind of teaching can also help to call out and critically engage the way the New Testament is frequently glossed as superior to the "Old Testament," and the persistent anti-Jewish prejudices that haunt Western societies particularly when it comes to notions of the nice, peace-loving Jesus (and by extension, the New Testament) versus the violent "God of the Old Testament." Larsson and Liljefors, "Att undervisa om 'Bibeln i politiken': Fallgropar och möjligheter," 131–132, 136–137, note the potential for biblical reception classes to critically grapple with these kinds of perceptions and prejudices.

[16] For an analysis of Lady Gaga's theology, see Stephen Roberts, "Beyond the Classic: Lady Gaga and Theology in the Wild Public Sphere," *International Journal of Public Theology* 11/2 (2017): 163–187. For a discussion of the Bible and digital culture, see for instance, Jeffrey S. Siker, *Liquid Scripture: The Bible in a Digital World* (Minneapolis:

that teaching biblical reception has serious stakes and high pedagogical pay-offs.

Old and New Contexts for Biblical Studies

Brennan Breed has suggested that biblical scholars could treat biblical scholarship more like ethology—the study of animal behaviour—than exegesis.[17] An "ethological perspective would define biblical texts by what they have looked like in all their variants and translations, by what they have actually done, and by what they are capable of doing in the future."[18] What is important about Breed's perspective on reception history is that it does not buy into the idea of a break between the study of the so-called "original" biblical texts in antiquity versus the study of their later reception. Rather, as he puts it, biblical texts are and were never quite at home.[19] Biblical texts are from the "very moment of their initial inscription, already sedimented with various semantic, literary, and historical contexts."[20] Teaching biblical reception is in many ways not a matter of adding something newfangled onto biblical studies classes, but a matter of taking seriously the instability of texts, their meaning and production, in complex processes of reception from the very beginning.

Teaching biblical reception in a contemporary context has the distinct advantage of easily being interactive and student-centred. Students themselves can do the "detective" work of either noticing where biblical

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Fortress, 2017).

[17] Brennan Breed, "What Can a Text Do? Reception History as an Ethology of the Biblical Text," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, eds., Emma England and Willian John Lyons (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 95–109 (98).

[18] Breed, "What Can a Text Do," 100.

[19] Brennan Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014), 202.

[20] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 204.

texts are used or analyzing and evaluating such use, once particular cases are pointed out to them. I have found that students frequently move from interest in, for instance, Alain Badiou's contemporary reading of Paul's letters[21] to new-found curiosity about the early contexts of these letters, asking questions that have long been central to historical-critical scholarship. Questions are posed that emerge from the material students study, leading students to other material, other sources. Students can also move the other direction, from interest in the biblical texts in their ancient contexts to an investigation of these texts in later contexts.[22]

Further, fieldwork opportunities are rife, particularly, I have found, in going to art galleries with students.[23] Individual work and team-work is ideal for prompting students to discover forms of biblical reception that are intriguing and important to them in their own context. Getting students to present the results of their findings in class is a way of collectively gathering data in a process where students are themselves researching biblical reception. It has the benefit of empowering students to become experts and to teach each other about the cases of biblical reception they have investigated.

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[21] Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (trans. Ray Brassier; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[22] Most biblical scholars move in this direction. Susan Gillingham discusses this choice of direction, see Susan Gillingham, "Biblical Studies in Holiday? A Personal View of Reception History," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, eds. Emma England and William John Lyons (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 17–30 (19–20). For the way Gillingham does this kind of work, see for instance, Susan Gillingham, *A Journey of Two Psalms: The Reception of Psalms 1 & 2 in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[23] There are also some very good online resources, such as the fantastic Visual Commentary on Scripture website (https://thevcs.org/).

The Relevance of Biblical Reception

There are risks with teaching biblical reception in the way I have just outlined. One risk in teaching classes on biblical reception in the West—with course titles, such as, "The Bible in Western Culture"—lies in the reinforcement of assumptions about the Bible and Western culture that perpetuate amnesia about colonial uses of the Bible.[24] Musa Dube has critiqued blithe statements (often by biblical scholars) about the congruence between the Bible and Western culture, without addressing the imperialist agendas that coercively and violently forced the Bible onto colonized peoples as a marker of Western superiority.[25] Additionally, such courses can become centred on high culture in ways that obscure questions of class, both in terms of the students' backgrounds but also in terms of the material that is taught. James Crossley has made this point, calling for more research in biblical reception on working-class groups to avoid giving the impression that the only biblical reception that exists and matters is: the Bible and Caravaggio, the Bible and Bach, or the Bible and Shakespeare.[26] I may not easily be able to teach biblical reception in China or Latin America, but in my role as a teacher, it is crucial that I am aware of, and critical with, the way I might implicitly be reinscribing the Bible as a centrepiece for Western Culture in ways that ignore the history of Bible use and the global socio-economic dynamics of biblical reception.

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[24] See for instance, Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), and C. L. Crouch and Jonathan Stökl, eds., *In the Name of God: The Bible in the Colonial Discourse of Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

[25] Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 23.

[26] James Crossley, "Capitalism, Class, and the Bible: A Very English Proposal," in *Challenging Contextuality: Bibles and Biblical Scholarship in Context*, eds. Louise Lawrence, Peter-Ben Smit, Hannah M. Strømmen, and Charlene van der Walt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2024).

Another risk in teaching classes on biblical reception is that the classroom itself might be seen as a secularized context that impedes, or at least minimizes, students' engagement with the Bible. In his monumental and much-cited, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor set out to explain the way Western societies have moved "from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."[27] According to Taylor, there has been a major "shift in background" in the Western world.[28] Secularization can be understood in different ways. It can be conceived as the decline in religious belief and practice measured by, for instance, church attendance.[29] It can be understood as the decreased presence of religious symbols, statements, artefacts, and rituals in public spaces.[30] And secularization can mean a fundamental shift in the very conditions for belief.[31] Each of these meanings pose a challenge for teaching biblical reception. Will there be anything in the public sphere for us to teach and analyze? If there is, will students recognize biblical motifs in, for instance, famous art works? Will they be familiar with the biblical stories that are referenced in speeches, literature, or in film, and on TV?[32]

Further, religion—and therefore also a topic like biblical reception—might seem irrelevant in a secularized classroom context. At best, religion might be seen as an outdated way of life, a private matter, or a vaguely benign force. At worst, it is what is used to justify terrorism,

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[27] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 3.

[28] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 14.

[29] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2.

[30] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2.

[31] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2.

[32] Philip Davies, "Whose Bible? Anyone's?" July 2009, *Bible and Interpretation* (https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/opeds/whose), cites various biblical literacy reports to bemoan the lack of knowledge about the Bible. For a critical discussion of biblical literacy and what we mean by it, see the contributions to Katie Edwards', ed., *Rethinking Biblical Literacy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

fuel fanaticism, and hold back progress on matters such as gender and sexuality. Dealing with the tacit perceptions, or explicitly voiced prejudices, about religion is a key challenge in teaching biblical reception. If religion is narrowly defined and uncritically accepted as a "natural" category, then it will most likely be a challenge to see how teaching biblical reception is significant in a Swedish context, apart from as a historical endeavor that sticks to antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the early modern period. But as historians and philosophers of religion have long been pointing out, the category of "religion" is a modern invention modelled on Christian understandings and encounters with other worldviews and practices across the globe.[33] The way "religion" overlaps and intersects with what we call "culture" and "politics," or "worldviews," and "life stances," helps to expose the way biblical reception is not to be found only amongst people who attend places of worship regularly.

Of course, the fact is that in a classroom, students will be affected by religion in different ways, whether that is from their own upbringing, neighborhood, or national context, or from global cultural franchises and transnational media. No place is religiously neutral, however secularized the place is in terms of religious membership, education, public spaces and debate. And nowhere is homogenous, even if a particular dominant "background" does persist, as Taylor puts it.[34] However much generalizations about secularization in Sweden may hold sway, revitalized forms of minority Christianities, persistent and embedded forms of Lutheranism, and the impact of migration, will mean that a classroom context is complex and changing. Biblical scholars would do well to not walk into a classroom with fixed assumptions about what secularization actually means and looks like. Unless we have undertaken sophisticated modes of analysis of our class demographics before the first class begins,

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[33] For an overview of this debate, see Jayne Svenungsson, "The Return of Religion or the End of Religion? On the Need to Rethink Religion as a Category of Social and Political Life," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 46/7 (2020): 785–809.

[34] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 13–14.

then assumptions about ignorance of the Bible is not necessarily well founded.[35] It is, in any case, not pedagogically useful.

Biblical Studies in the Humanities

The question of the recognizability of the Bible in culture, media, and politics can at its best be capitalized on for class discussions, by discussing with students theories of secularization,[36] critical engagement with notions of religious and biblical literacy,[37] addressing historical changes over time,[38] and grappling with the particular national contexts of students as these national contexts interact dynamically with larger global trends.[39] Rather than expecting students to automatically spot uses of

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[35] I have never undertaken sophisticated demographic analysis of my classes, but I have often used anonymous questionnaires at the start of courses to get a sense of different levels of knowledge about the Bible. I have found that it's important that these are not perceived as tests, as this then quickly becomes a way of shaming students for ignorance, rather than a pedagogical opportunity to adapt to the particular class. When there are highly varied levels of knowledge of (or familiarity with) the biblical texts (as there normally was in my classes), that of course poses a challenge, but this can be adapted to in a number of ways such as individual tasks, group work, targeted lectures, extra handouts, and different tiers of suggested reading.

[36] This could include historical formulations of secularization from Taylor, as I have already cited, or more comparative studies such as Linell E. Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, eds., *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), Jonathan Lawrence, ed., *Secularism in Comparative Perspective* (Berlin: Springer, 2023), to more recent critiques of secularization, such as An Yountae, *The Coloniality of the Secular* (Durham: Duke University press, 2024).

[37] See for instance Edwards, ed., *Rethinking Biblical Literacy*, and Justine Esta Ellis, *The Politics of Religious Literacy: Education and Emotion in a Secular Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

[38] One could for instance discuss Jonathan Sheehan's influential idea of the rise of a Cultural Bible during the Enlightenment period: Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[39] As I argue in "The Bible in the North: Commodity and Content on the Secular Market," *SEÅ* 89 (2024), 45–67. See also, Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro

the Bible in culture, media, and politics, the teacher can help guide learning by presenting a variety of cases of biblical reception. These cases are perhaps at their most productive when they demonstrate the plurality of the Bible in terms of different formal canons, informal canons, translations, and versions.[40] But also, by elucidating different kinds of intensity in biblical reception, from the explicit and extensive Bible use in Martin Luther King Junior's speeches or in many of Margaret Atwood's novels, to the more amorphous and subtle cases of biblical reception that can be found for instance in the Harry Potter franchise or in Lars von Trier's films.[41] Instead of faltering in frustration at the fact students may not recognize a reference to Genesis or the Book of Revelation, a key part of the task of teaching can be both to prompt further investigation on the part of students (after different cases and contexts are discussed), and to draw on research in the Humanities that helps students to contextualize their own time and place in history and society.

Larsen, and Outi Lehtipuu, "Bible Reception in a Nordic Context," in *The Nordic Bible: Bible Reception in Contemporary Nordic Societies*, eds., Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro Larsen, and Outi Lehtipuu (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2023), 3–21.

[40] Terje Stordalen, "The Production of Authority in Levantine Scriptural Ecologies: An Example of Accumulative Cultural Production," in *Levantine Entanglements: Cultural Productions, Long-Term Changes and Globalizations in the Eastern Mediterranean*, eds., idem and Øystein S. LaBianca (Sheffield: Equinox, 2021), 322–372, calls for a more empirical, historical, comparative, and critical concept of canonicity when talking about biblical canons than has frequently been used. He uses the term "canonical ecologies" to explicate the complex way collections of texts interact with different kinds of institutions, materials, and agents, to have social significance and cultural capital.

[41] Mikael Larsson, "Confession, Masculinity and Biblical Reception in Lars von Trier's The House that Jack Built," in *The Nordic Bible: Bible Reception in Contemporary Nordic Identity Formation*, eds., Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro Larsen, and Outi Lehtipuu (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 253–272, writes about how biblical reception can include engagement with biblical traditions, in the widest sense, rather than only explicit references to particular biblical texts.

Accusations of "barbarism" for not knowing the Bible, à la Richard Dawkins,[42] arguably displays a lack of curiosity as to the actual lives of students and ignorance at the particular sociological conditions in which students find themselves. Further, if students are *not* familiar with the Bible, this can be an advantage. Unfamiliarity can function as a key prompt to turn to relevant biblical texts and support students in becoming acquainted with these texts in comparison with their receptions.[43] Not everyone will agree that it is a good in itself for people to be acquainted with the Bible. But the case can easily be made, and should be made, that histories of biblical interpretation and Bible use have been hugely influential historically, culturally, politically, and philosophically—whether we like it or not. Therefore, a greater acquaintance with biblical texts can aid students in critical thinking about historical processes and developments, histories of ideas and interpretations, changing practices and uses of sacred texts. Further, the advantage with less or no familiarity with the Bible is that the biblical texts can be acknowledged as strange and maybe even estranging. As Robert Carroll has pointed out, it can be a problem if biblical texts become too domesticated, whereby we cease to realize they emerged in a very different time to our own.[44]

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[42] Richard Dawkins, "Why I Want All Our Children to Read the King James Bible," *The Guardian*, 19 May 2012 (https://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/may/19/richard-dawkins-king-james-bible). If I seem particularly sensitive to these kinds of accusations of student ignorance, it is because I have heard them informally on quite a few occasions.

[43] In biblical reception studies there are different ways of viewing this relationship. Most scholars do not hold up a strong distinction between some notion of "original" biblical text versus later receptions. Brennan Breed, *Nomadic Text,* has provided a thorough critique of this kind of distinction. There are trends in reception studies that emphasise the first or canonised versions of biblical texts and argue that later receptions shed important light on these versions. See for instance, Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, *In Search of Jonathan: Jonathan Between the Bible and Modern Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[44] Robert P. Carroll, *Wolf in the Sheepfold: The Bible as Problematic for Theology*

Analysing references to the Bible in a Lady Gaga music video may be fun and highly motivating for a student who loves Lady Gaga, but that does not mean it produces good work. Holly Morse has drawn attention to the problem of studies in biblical reception remaining a descriptive activity that lists or catalogues biblical references.[45] It may be interesting *that* a biblical text is cited in an unexpected context, but as I have already touched upon, this fact is only really a starting point rather than the end. What is interesting for pedagogical (and research) purposes, is *what*, *how*, *why*, and *to what effect*, a biblical text is cited. Theoretical sophistication, analytical acuity, methodological awareness, and historical contextualization, do not come of themselves. Any work in biblical reception needs to attend to larger trends, contexts, histories, and shifting tendencies in biblical interpretation and use. Of course, biblical scholars are well set up to deal with hermeneutical questions that are hugely relevant for biblical reception.[46] Plenty of resources on hermeneutics and on different modes of biblical interpretation exist and can be utilized and set for students. Some are explicitly designed for this purpose without compromising on depth and complexity.[47]

(London: SCM, 1997).

[45] Holly Morse, *Encountering Eve's Afterlives: A New Reception Critical Approach to Genesis 2–4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 3.

[46] There would be too much to mention here in terms of both introductory and advanced resources on biblical interpretation. Books such as Werner Jeanrond's *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (Berlin: Springer, 1991) and David Jasper's *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Louisville: John Knox, 2004) provide historical overviews of the rise of hermeneutics in relation to biblical interpretation, but set in the larger frame of developments also in theology, philosophy, and literature. Darren Sarisky's anthology, *Theology, History, and Biblical Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), is a helpful resource in that it collects a number of influential texts from the early modern era to today that have been important for hermeneutics, including brief introductions for each text.

[47] See for instance Karin Zetterholm, *Jewish Interpretation of the Bible: Ancient and Contemporary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012). As this is a reworked version of a book published in Swedish it can be offered as set reading for Swedish-speaking students and

Not as much scholarship exists that concretely deals with biblical reception and can straightforwardly be purposed for pedagogical purposes. There are, however, key studies that can be lectured on or set as reading, depending on the level of the class and the focus. For instance, when it comes to the material and iconic uses of Bibles, James Watts has published a number of books that can be used in classes, including comparative work on the use of sacred scriptures.[48] For the key historical developments during the European Enlightenment in which the status of the Bible and its place in society, Jonathan Sheehan's *The Enlightenment Bible*, has already become a classic amongst biblical reception scholars.[49] Michael Legaspi's *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, works well to accompany Sheehan on the way "the Bible" is (or is not) perceived as scripture.[50] Hanna Liljefors has developed the concept of a "mediatized Bible" to help scholars and students understand the way particular kinds of media logic impact the way "the Bible" (or parts of the Bible) are presented in the media.[51] For an enormous array of examples of the material, symbolic, interpretive, and exegetical reception of different parts of the Bible, Vincent Wimbush's *African Americans and the Bible*, is unbeatable in breadth and sophistication, and for something more local and recent in Scandinavia, *The Nordic Bible*, edited by Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro Larsen, and Outi Lehtipuu is eluci-

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non-Swedish-speaking students (Karin Hedner Zetterholm, *Inte i himlen: Text, tolkning och tillämpning i judisk tradition* [Lund: Arcus Förlag, 2008]).

[48] James W. Watts, *Understanding the Bible as a Scripture in History, Culture, and Religion* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2021). For a good overview of Watt's work, see James W. Watts, *How and Why Books Matter: Essays on the Social Function of Iconic Texts* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2019). For a comparative approach to scripture, see idem and Yohan Yoo, eds., *Books as Bodies and as Sacred Beings* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2021).

[49] Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*.

[50] Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[51] Hanna Liljefors, *Hebreiska bibeln debatterad: en receptionskritisk studie av diskurser om "Gamla testamentet" i svenska dagstidningar 1987–2017* (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma Bokförlag, 2022).

dating.[52] If the aim is to demonstrate to students how a particular biblical book or character has been understood and imagined over time then Yvonne Sherwood's *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, Nyasha Junior's *Reimagining Hagar*, and Sara Koenig's *Bathsheba Survives* provide illustrative examples.[53] For courses focusing on antisemitism and nationalism, Susannah Heschel's *The Aryan Jesus* and Halvor Moxnes' *Jesus and the Rise of Nationalism*, are crucial contributions.[54] Much literature can be found outside biblical studies too, such as the historian M. Lindsay Kaplan's *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity*, which maps how readings of biblical figures impacted notions of race.[55]

Teaching classes on biblical reception presents ever-growing possibilities for analysis, from crucial issues such as populist politics, apocalyptic imaginaries, and artificial intelligence, to questions of race, class, and gender. The purpose is to better understand, and gain the skills to analyse, the influence and impact of biblical texts throughout time. It is crucial in such classes to be sensitive to the varied and changing contextual factors that impact students' familiarity with the Bible, and for the discussion of biblical reception to be situated in conversation with research in the Humanities more broadly. Learning about different kinds of biblical reception allows students to sharpen key hermeneutical tools

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[52] Vincent Wimbush, ed., *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2000); Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro Larsen, and Outi Lehtipuu, eds., *The Nordic Bible: Bible Reception in Contemporary Nordic Societies* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2023).

[53] Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Nyasha Junior, *Reimagining Hagar: Blackness and Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Sara M. Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives* (London: SCM, 2019).

[54] Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Halvor Moxnes, *Jesus and Nationalism: A New Quest for the Nineteenth Century Historical Jesus* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

[55] M. Lindsay Kaplan, *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

of analysis and evaluation. Classes on biblical reception can easily encourage interactive student-centred learning by prompting students to pose research questions about the issues they recognize as important, while developing appreciation for the plurality of Bibles at work in society, and the stakes involved in different claims to what "the Bible" means. Awakening curiosity for how biblical texts have survived for so long and continue to circulate, sometimes in unexpected places, can be a way for students to discover phenomena around them that they might not otherwise have noticed, and to develop their own agency as researchers in largely unchartered territory. My experience has been that students have frequently been the ones to teach me about new and fascinating forms of biblical reception, and I hope they will keep teaching me.