

# STUDYING THE BIBLE IN JERUSALEM AND NEW HAVEN

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Fascinated during my teenage years by software engineering and programming languages, I pursued a BS in electrical engineering from the University of Oklahoma, which I received in 1991. During my professional career over the next decade, however, I began to question whether I could find long-term fulfillment in jobs that were essentially aimed at ensuring my financial stability. My interest in the Bible and related cultures inspired me to consider a postgraduate education in biblical studies and a career in that field. In 2001, I therefore applied to the Rothberg International School at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and was accepted into the MA program for the Bible and the Ancient Near East.

I received my degree in two years, but remained in Israel two additional years conducting predoctoral studies. Advised by my colleagues that it would be wise to obtain my PhD through a degree-granting institution situated in the country where I eventually planned to teach, I applied and was accepted into the PhD program in Hebrew Bible at Yale University, nestled in the seaside community of New Haven, Connecticut. Now in my third year as a PhD candidate, I feel that I have already had the opportunity to savor the best of two

different worlds. Although my perspective is necessarily subjective, I feel it might be helpful to share my

insights, comparing and contrasting the different programs and approaches in the two countries in which I have studied.

First of all, one should not overlook the fact that the academic calendars of both The Hebrew University and

Yale revolve around the religious holidays of their countries' respective cultures.

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have already passed proficiency exams in Bible before attending a university. This obviates the need for the exercise customary in many western institutions of reading the biblical text, translating, and parsing most verbal forms. At The Hebrew University, degree candidates must also attain competency in English and German, and they are strongly encouraged to learn French. Yale, on the other hand, mandates reading fluency in German and French, with no particular emphasis on Modern Hebrew. A student who has passed through both learning environments, therefore, is in a position to avail himself or herself of biblical scholarship written in no less than four modern languages.

The Hebrew Bible program at Yale, one of ten fields of specialization available at the graduate level in the Department of Religious Studies, has four full-time faculty members. This number is deceptive, however, due to the program's strong interdisciplinary approach. Students are encouraged to take courses in other

relevant subject areas such as Jewish studies or Near Eastern languages and civilizations. In Jerusalem, there is a separate department of Hebrew Bible with twenty active faculty members and approximately thirty courses offered in a given year. The diversity of instruction enables students to obtain exposure to a broad variety of methodological approaches and points of view.

Graduate courses at The Hebrew University typically consist of lectures conducted by the instructor, with select topics occasionally highlighted via short student-led presentations. At Yale, it



one's faith background, it is somewhat disconcerting to be asked to

attend class on what one personally regards as a holy day. At both universities, students whose faith is not reflected in the prevailing academic calendar may feel somewhat aggrieved, but neither institution can be faulted, in my opinion, for failing to eliminate school days in order to facilitate sacred observances "across the board."

The culture also determines the language of instruction. In Israel, Hebrew is of course the predominant language and is utilized in the classroom. Students are fluent in Modern Hebrew and



is not unusual for entire courses to be structured around the input of student participants, with each class session organized by one or two of them. In this setting, the instructors facilitate classroom discussion and also contribute pertinent ideas or comments. This method of instruction is consonant with Yale's goal of preparing its scholars to teach in an academic environment, something that PhD candidates begin to do in the third year of the program. One of the advantages of this approach is that it permits each student to draw upon personal research while concentrating on a particular area of interest or specialization.

The faculty in New Haven will, on occasion, pose perplexing questions to the class, such as "Who composed the book of Deuteronomy?" These stimulating zingers are designed to provoke far-reaching classroom discussions, which need not settle the issue or even reach a consensus opinion. In Jerusalem, the faculty tend to raise questions that are necessarily thorny but may nevertheless be resolved by painstaking examination of the biblical text, such as "Does the Molech offering refer to child sacrifice?" In this situation, the queries are less open-ended, and serve to guide the student's understanding toward a resolution of the problem.

A corollary to this teaching method at The Hebrew University is that philology is central to the academic approach to Scripture; after all, how can one study a text before one comprehends its constituent words? Professors raise questions that stem directly from the text itself, which is at the same time the first recourse for students in resolving these very

inquiries. While a Yale instructor might introduce a lecture on a biblical passage by asking "When was this text written?" the philological approach demands that this determination be made at the end of class, only after the text itself has been thoroughly examined.

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audience in antiquity. The issue of whether or not Daniel should be designated as a prophet is such an example: while modern researchers generally agree that Daniel was not a prophet, ancient texts affirm that he was indeed viewed as such. In Jerusalem, the focus is on the meaning of the biblical text as intended by the author, with modern religious significance intentionally set aside. While this goal is shared by Yale's biblical studies program, its Divinity School permits a fusion of both academic study and personal application, training seminary students in the use of the Hebrew Bible in Christian faith and practice.

The writing of papers is everywhere part and parcel of a graduate student's life, and philosophical differences are no less evident here. Papers at Yale tend to explore a topic, such as the history of the interpretation of a particular biblical passage. Such compositions vary greatly in length and may or may not yield broad results. At The Hebrew University, papers are typically intended to answer a

single, specific question, such as "Is the wilderness Tabernacle historical?" These papers are subjected to page limits by the instructor, and tend to have very localized conclusions.

Academic study of the *Tanakh* takes pride of place in the Hebrew Bible department in Jerusalem, and the approach taken is for the most part conservative. Explication of the biblical text begins with rabbinic literature or the medieval

commentators, and progresses from there. Yale adopts a broader purview, amenable to more postmodern ideas, including feminist and gender studies. It also exhibits a greater interest in the history

of Israelite religion; that is, the reconstruction of the society's actual religious practices lying behind what is presented in Scripture.

While my reflections have necessarily revolved around the different approaches that enter into play in two different universities, both institutions nevertheless have a great deal in common and exemplify the best of American and Israeli academic instruction. The two schools admirably reflect their religious heritage and embrace their respective cultures, and share the deep belief in the continuing impact of the Hebrew Bible in the world today. Both programs have their merits, and exposure to both systems of learning is highly advantageous to the serious student of Scripture. I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to study at both of these time-honored institutions.

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