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A RESPONSE TO EDWARD GREENSTEIN’S
PRAGMATIC PEDAGOGY OF BIBLE**

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“EXPERIENCE HAS WAYS OF BOILING OVER:” A RESPONSE TO EDWARD GREENSTEIN’S PRAGMATIC PEDAGOGY OF BIBLE

Jon A. Levisohn

ABSTRACT

Responding to Edward Greenstein’s paper, “A Pragmatic Pedagogy of Bible”, the author raises a number of questions provoked by Greenstein’s suggestion that teachers of Bible should choose their methodological approaches to the biblical text for particular contexts and groups of students, with an eye towards interpretive ends. He argues that Greenstein’s position might be easily misinterpreted as relativistic, and that scholars and teachers do—and should—debate the relative merits of particular interpretive approaches (of which Greenstein’s discussion approaches to the story of the Tower of Babel is, in fact, an example). Interpretive methodologies “work” not only by producing desired results, but by responding to the full range of textual evidence—including those aspects of a text which cause the reader to become aware of her own assumptions and even rethink her belief(s); such potentially transformative challenges are at the heart of the educational encounter with foundational texts. Finally, the author argues that pedagogic choices are not just a matching process between students, context, and interpretive approach, but also about which texts we choose to teach in the first place, what kind of interactions with and dispositions toward the biblical text we want to foster and how we might do so.

In “A Pragmatic Pedagogy of Bible,” Greenstein argues briefly but powerfully that we are long past the time when any particular methodological approach to the study of the Hebrew Bible (or anything else!) might claim exclusive authority, and that we ought to acknowledge that “the results we produce are dependent upon the particular approaches that we choose to employ” (p. 2). In other words, there is no one correct meaning of the biblical text that is waiting for us, if we could only develop the right methodology. “Each approach to the analysis and interpretation of a text will yield its own type of meaning or understanding” (p. 3). He argues, further, that any particular interpretive strategy inevitably falls short of encompassing or accounting for *all* of the data, thus opening the door to rival interpretations.

Given those points, he argues that we ought first to determine what kind of meaning we are interested in discovering or promoting, given whatever educational context we find ourselves in, and then choose an approach that will generate a textual meaning that is appropriate to that context. Finally,

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he offers a delightful exploration of the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), using the text and the approaches to the interpretation of the text as a case study of the points he wants to make. Particularly notable, here, is his deconstructive reading of the narrative, where the text is interpreted, paradoxically, as a challenge to the very idea of conclusive interpretations; and his creative use of Nehama Leibowitz to pursue his argument for the primacy of meaning – moral meaning – rather than technique or expertise.

There is much to appreciate here. It is surely correct that the interpretation of a subtle and complex text like the Bible is a fundamentally pluralistic enterprise, that it makes room for multiple (although not infinite) possibilities, that interpretations serve multiple purposes, and that their insight or coherence is always going to be assessed relative to those purposes and within the community of interpreters that shares those purposes. In place of doctrinaire debates over the proper methodology of studying the Bible, Greenstein offers us a comfortable flexibility – or indeed, in his hands, a rather virtuoso methodological multilingualism. And is surely correct, moreover, that teachers of Bible will be well served by the kind of critical self-examination of method and premises that Greenstein’s argument may provoke. In this sense, his article contributes to the effort undertaken by Holtz in his discussion of orientations: at the very least, by teasing apart alternative approaches, it serves to raise the question (for the educator) of which approaches one is committed to, and why, and how consistently.¹

And yet, there are a number of ways in which Greenstein’s discussion is not quite satisfying. To begin, there’s an implicit suggestion that the choice among methodological approaches is, in a particular sense, irrational. That is, methodological approaches themselves are not subject to rational critique, because they are dependent on ideological commitment or possibly even idiosyncrasy. “The results that we produce are dependent upon the particular approaches that *we choose to employ*” (p. 2, italics mine). “You can always choose a different purpose, and a different corresponding path, at another time” (p. 3). The picture here, or at least the implication, is that the choice is a personal one, and that it is foolish to bother debating among the options. *Al ta’am va-re’ab*, as we sometimes say, or in other contexts, *De gustibus non disputandum est*. And yet, Greenstein’s own discussion in this article is a nuanced example of the way that we actually do discuss and debate the relative merits of particular interpretive approaches!

Next, consider the metaphor of the x-ray machine and the ultrasound. At first glance, these two devices are perfect analogies for interpretive methodologies: we have a body (a text), that we want to interrogate to see what it is made of or what its internal structure is (its meaning), and we have two tools to use, each of which will show certain features but not others. Neither, of course, shows the whole truth of the body; so far so good. But the analogy has certain flaws. As Greenstein himself

¹ Barry Holtz, *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice* (JTS Press, 2003). Other research that may likewise promote a similar critical examination of practice – via the portrayal of multiple options or approaches – include Tova Hartman Halbertal, *CITE*; Michael Rosenak, *Roads to the Palace: Jewish Texts and Teaching* (Bergahn Books, 1995); Asher Shkedi and Gabi Horenczyk, “The Role of Teacher Ideology in the Teaching of Culturally Valued Texts,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 11:2 (1995), 107–117; and Dinah Laron and Asher Shkedi, “Between Two Languages: Student-Teachers Teach Jewish Content,” *Religious Education* 102:2 (2007), 172–190. This is not the place, of course, for a critical comparison of the various typologies set out in these texts, but such an inquiry would be a welcome contribution to the field.

says, at the heart of the Pragmatism which serves as the theoretical background for his argument is the idea that inquiry begins with a problem – so it’s not quite correct to imagine that we simply start out by deciding whether to take an ultrasound or an x-ray of a body, and then wait to see whether our technique works (as Greenstein says, on p. 4). Rather, the patient presents with, say, an obstructed bowel or a broken arm. In the latter case, we take the x-ray, and wait to see whether our diagnosis (an hypothesis) is confirmed. If it is, then we can say that the x-ray “worked.” In fact, even if our hypothesis is disconfirmed – if there is no fracture – we would say that the x-ray “worked,” because it furthered our understanding of the situation. When we turn to the interpretation of biblical texts, too, we have to think about what kind of problem or question is generating the inquiry, rather than simply weighing the available interpretive techniques. To simply talk about what “works,” in the abstract, is not sufficient.

In fact, it is worth attending to the original context of the association of Pragmatism with “what works.” The idea is typically attributed to William James, who (it is often said) defined truth as “what works.” What he actually wrote, however, is this:

‘The true,’ to put it briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking... Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole of course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won’t necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily. Experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas.²

I do not intend to focus on any potential distinction between “expedient” and “works.” I do think, however, that it’s important to note that James’ point is a moderately technical one about the nature of truth, or more precisely, of “the true”. What James is arguing is that “the true” – think of true statements or true beliefs – are like tools. They do certain things for us, and thus can be thought of as doing those things more or less effectively. But we already think about methodologies in this way, i.e., as tools; to do otherwise – to talk about methodologies as true or false, in themselves – seems odd. So what we can learn from James, in this passage, is not an insight about methodologies but rather an insight about particular interpretations. That insight would be something like this: true interpretations are those that work (in whatever sense of the term “work”), that perform their function effectively, that do the job that we need them to do.

But it is important, further, to consider the difference between the simplistic suggestion that a true interpretation is one that works (i.e., one that works for me, here and now, one that solves whatever problem I am currently having with the text or with my life) and James’ rather more nuanced suggestion that a true interpretation is one that works “in the long run and on the whole.”³ When we think about the process of textual interpretation, those adverbial clauses point to the way in which an interpretation may have a kind of local, temporary plausibility that slips through our fingers once we start to consider the full range of the data, or the implications of the interpretation, or the

² William James, “Lecture 6: Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” in *Pragmatism* (1907).

³ Hilary Putnam refers to this passage in [CITE].

interpretive assumptions that underly it. As Alexander Nehamas once wrote, “we often grant a particular reading plausibility by *not looking enough at its details*.”⁴ Indeed, that is the force of James’ final sentence in the block quote above: experience, including interpretive experience, does have a way of “boiling over” – assuming, of course, that we are still diligently watching the proverbial pot. And Greenstein’s cogent points about the data that are not encompassed by this or that interpretation of the Tower of Babel – ways in which interpretations that seem, at first, quite compelling are weakened when we look at all the textual evidence – are exactly the boiling-over-of-experience that James has in mind.⁵

I’ve taken this short excursus because there are moments in Greenstein’s argument when he sounds a good deal more relativistic than the picture that one gets from James. I suspect that these moments do not reflect his actual position, and if so, my critique should be taken in the spirit of a caution about how Greenstein might be misinterpreted. For example, he writes that “adopting a source-critical approach to the study of Torah, one will always succeed in finding more than one textual source there” (p. 4). Will one *always* succeed in finding more than one textual source? It’s true, of course, that when one takes an x-ray, one always finds bones (assuming that one takes an x-ray of some appropriate part of a normal body). But one does not always find a *fracture*. The x-ray, that is, does not *always* provide an explanation for the presenting problem; the actual condition of the body has a say in the matter! So, too, a source critical analysis is not guaranteed to generate a compelling explanation for a textual problem (where “textual problem” encompasses a whole range of things that generate interpretive momentum). To suggest otherwise is to confuse source criticism as an hypothesis (about the origins of the text, in which the idea of multiple sources is of course the foundational claim) with source criticism as a technique or a mode of inquiry informed by that hypothesis.

Another location where Greenstein sounds (or, may be misinterpreted as being) rather overly relativistic is in his discussion of Exodus 19 and 20 and the question of who was addressed by God and Moses at Sinai. According to Greenstein, a “close reading” leads one to the conclusion that, according to the text, only men were addressed. But if that reading is unacceptable, Greenstein says, not to fear, because inclusive midrashic alternatives are available. As a third possibility, Greenstein suggests a “cultural relativistic perspective” which explains away the non-egalitarianism of the text as a product of its particular historical and cultural location (“since then, we have come to understand that God addresses women as well”). His point, here, is that one can consult one’s ideological predilections and pursue whatever interpretive path one wishes; the text has little if anything to say about which path to pursue.

⁴ Alexander Nehamas, “The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal,” *Critical Inquiry* 8:1 (1981), 133-150, italics mine.

⁵ But if it is true that no interpretation can encompass all the data, that there will always be unaccounted-for aspects of the text, doesn’t this undermine the point? Why should it bother us that some data remains unencompassed by the interpretation, if indeed that is inevitable anyway? This is a complicated question that cuts to the heart of what it means to interpret a text, but for the present, perhaps it is sufficient to suggest the following. Some outlying data, once acknowledged, is sufficient to undermine our confidence in the interpretation. In other cases, on the other hand, we note that outlying data but are comfortable saying, “Well, yes, of course, no text means only one thing, and only a hypothetical perfect text would have one and only one interpretation, but this interpretation of this text still works.”

Now, there is surely something right about the way in which our commitment to egalitarianism (of whatever kind) influences how we read these texts. (Ironically, in this respect, the midrashic voices and the medievals who followed them are “egalitarian” in the sense that they could not abide the thought that women would not be included in the covenant, and hence found a creative way to include them.) But these three options are not equivalent choices. The midrash on Exodus 19:3 that includes women in the community is surely a *reaction* to the plain sense of the text in 19:5 and 20:13, not simply an alternative or a replacement. It is precisely because the *peshat* is unavoidable that the midrashic author felt the need to offer a kind of corrective. Similarly, the historicizing option is not a negation of the *peshat*; on the contrary, it *accepts* the *peshat*, and then proceeds to ask the theological question of how to make sense of a non-egalitarian covenantal moment. In other words, while Greenstein seems to suggest that the text is putty in the hands of the ideologically motivated interpreter, who can twist it this way or that, this example actually suggests the opposite: that the plain sense of the text is incontrovertible, that it is a brute fact that one (or one’s students!) must either accept or with which one must negotiate.

Lest I be misunderstood, I do not actually think that the text is, as I just said, a “brute fact.” *Peshat* is no less a product of interpretation than *derash*, just a different *kind* of interpretation – and famously, what one takes to be *peshat* is not stable over time or across interpretive frameworks. But the point is that Greenstein’s argument, at times, seems to legitimate the unfettered creativity of the interpretive process. Actual interpretive practice, on the other hand, is not quite so free. “Experience,” as James said, “has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas.” Or as Hans-Georg Gadamer famously put it, we are sometimes “pulled up short” by the text.⁶ What is so fascinating about the question of who is addressed in Exodus 19 and 20 is that, once the question is asked, the answer is unavoidable.

This leads directly to my next point. The experience-boiling-over phenomenon, or the phenomenon of being pulled up short, does not only occur when a word or a detail does not fit with my attempted interpretation, as in Greenstein’s proposed interpretations of Genesis 11. It also occurs in deeper and more profound ways, when I discover, via an encounter with a text, that I have to rethink some belief, when I become aware of assumptions that now seem questionable, when I gain insight into my own values, when the text confronts me and challenges me in some way. We are not always *open* to such challenges, of course. We are all very well practiced at finding texts that say exactly what we want them to say, or even more to the point, at finding exactly what we want to believe in whatever text we happen to be encountering. But the possibility of challenge, the possibility of genuine confrontation, the possibility of *change*, I would venture to say, is at the heart of the educational encounter with foundational texts.

But if Greenstein is correct about the way in which we choose an approach in order to suit our needs, what becomes of this potential for confrontation? If I am so busy figuring out how to set things up for my students – if I “choose an approach that will yield the kind of meaning that will produce the response ... I am seeking to produce in the students” (p. 5) – then how will they or I ever get pulled

⁶ CITE from T&M; CITE Deborah Kerdeman article

up short by the text? If I can always choose an approach that works for me, as I am now, with my current beliefs, or that works for them, as they are now, with their current beliefs, then what happens to the possibility that the text will actually change me?

Much of the preceding discussion has focused on the nature of the interpretive process, and insofar as teachers and students are interpreters of texts, it clearly relates to education. But before ending, we ought to be more precise about the relationship. What, we might ask, does any of this have to do with teaching and learning? For Greenstein, there are two important connections. First, already mentioned, is the connection to orientations. On the one hand, Greenstein is surely correct that if we can generate awareness of the multiplicity of interpretive approaches, or orientations, we will then "be in the enviable position of being able to select the approach that we will take when reading a given text" (p. 3). However, his casual association of the variety of interpretive methodologies, on the one hand, with Holtz' orientations to the teaching of Bible, on the other, is problematic. A research methodology is not the same thing as a teaching orientation. An orientation is a collection of beliefs, educational goals, and pedagogic practices that hang together in particularly recognizable ways. Some distinctions among methodologies, however, are too fine-grained to manifest themselves as distinct orientations. If two teachers believe (more or less) the same thing about the text and the purpose of teaching it, and if they typically does (more or less) the same things in teaching the text, then it makes little sense to distinguish their teaching orientations from each other.

This is not a mere technical question of what counts as an orientation. Rather, it points to the larger and more general question – and this is the second connection to teaching and learning – of the purposes of teaching Bible and what pedagogic practices will serve those purposes. For Greenstein, steeped in and passionate about the subtleties of the interpretation of the text, it all starts with the text. We know that we are teaching the Tower of Babel, and we then have to explore the interpretive options.

When we teach, we need to consider whether and how the approaches that we take and the meanings that we make will serve the personal interests of our students. What meaning or meanings will interest, arouse, provoke, excite? (p 5)

Greenstein is cautioning against a pedagogy in which the students are invisible or irrelevant, a pedagogy driven by (what one takes to be) the true interpretation of the text. And yet, in his picture, the pedagogic choices that we make are somewhat narrowly focused on a kind of matching process, paying attention to the students (and the context) in order to discern what interpretation, and what interpretive approach, is most appropriate.

Or consider his description of the procedure of the "superior teacher":

See where the various approaches lead you, and then take your students down whichever roads lead to where you want to take them on any particular learning occasion. (p. 3)

Again, in this picture, the instructor is admirably flexible – but the assumption, here, is that one already knows (how is not clear) that one is teaching a particular text; one already has a "learning

occasion” arranged; everything is set. To be sure, there are choices to be made about what to say, what questions to ask, how much students should read in advance or whether they should study in *bevruta*, what kinds of assignments to give and what kinds of assessments to construct – but in this picture, those are all mere technicalities. The only pedagogic question that counts is which interpretation is the right one to be promoting, which “road” one should take.

But what text are we to teach? Should we even be teaching the Tower of Babel (to whatever audience we imagine)? Why or why not? Are we teaching the mythic pre-patriarchal narratives? Are we teaching *parashat ha-shavua*, the weekly portion? Are we teaching the most famous stories of the Old Testament? Are we, perhaps, teaching intriguing and complex texts that have both historical-contextual and symbolic interpretations? Any of those might be good contexts for teaching the Genesis 11 – or they might not be.

Nor is the question of which text to teach the only other substantive pedagogic question. What do we want students to *do* in this class? What are the qualities of interaction with the biblical text that we want to foster, and how might we foster those qualities? Do we have – or, could we construct – a conception of what it means to become a responsible interpreter of Bible (into which practice we are trying over time to introduce our students), a conception that encompasses a set of skills and dispositions, a conception that informs our decision to read the text in Hebrew or in English, a conception that structures what we say or what we ask, a conception that informs how we chunk the text or whether we ask the students to do so, a conception that provides a justification for teaching this text here and now? What are we trying to accomplish anyway, when we teach this mysterious subject called Bible? What, we might ask, is our conception of Bible as a subject? And what is the nature of the learning that we aspire to promote?

Greenstein’s verbs in the first quote above – “interest, arouse, provoke, excite” – are intriguing and evocative, but frustratingly undisciplined, in both sense of the term: they are loose rather than precise, and they do not suggest the kind of disciplinary framework that ought to form the basis for a well-developed curriculum. The avoidance of a doctrinaire this-is-the-one-correct-meaning-of-the-text pedagogy is all well and good, and for that Greenstein is to be applauded. But we ought not to replace it with a rather thinly didactic here-is-one-of-several-possible-correct-meanings pedagogy, or even a pedagogy of here-is-the-best-meaning-for-this-particular-occasion. Instead, our pedagogic choices ought to flow from, or be justified by, a well-developed sense of our objectives in teaching this subject, in choosing the texts that we choose to teach, and in adopting the particular pedagogic practices that we adopt.

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