

INTRODUCING THE CONTEXTUAL ORIENTATION TO
BIBLE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

*In what Barry Holtz has called the “contextual orientation” to the teaching of Bible, the teacher strives to present the Bible in its original context and to promote the students’ understanding of its meaning in that context. But what does teaching within this orientation actually look like? What are its central features, its pedagogical objectives? What choices do teachers make **within** this orientation? This paper pursues these questions via a comparative study of how one teacher introduces the Bible in two settings: a university Bible course and an adult Jewish education setting.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Much of what we know about the teaching of Bible is anecdotal, based on our experiences or limited impressions of the experiences of others. What is important to teachers of Bible in different settings and for different kinds of students? What decisions do teachers make, and on what basis? What does teaching Bible actually look like? Those who teach Bible themselves, and especially those who are involved with the education of teachers, surely have ideas about these questions, but we have almost no research literature on the subject.¹

The recent publication of *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice*, by Barry Holtz,² is an important step forward. Among other aspects of his study of the subject, Holtz establishes an organizational scheme for the variety of approaches or “orientations” to the teaching of Bible.³ But

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¹ The kind of research literature that I have in mind can be rigorous and systematic without being large-scale and generalizable. But beyond rigor and systematicity, the key quality of research literature, either empirical or conceptual, is that it is public property: the ideas are presented formally in a venue that is accessible to others, which then allows others to critique those ideas and to build on them. In the case of the present paper, I do not claim that the features of the contextual orientation that I will present are either necessary or sufficient for its implementation. I do hope, however, that a careful presentation and discussion of these features is a step towards greater understanding of the orientation, which will then allow others to develop further work on that basis.

² JTS Press, 2003. I have written on the book elsewhere; see “How to Do Philosophy of Religious Education,” *Religious Education* 100:1 (2005).

³ Holtz deals exclusively with the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh, as will I. It is of course true that “Bible” means different things to different people, itself an important pedagogical topic. But for the purpose of this paper, I will simply use “Bible” to refer to the Hebrew Bible.

the book is not the last word on the topic. In fact, in light of what I have written above, one might say that a primary virtue of the book – especially the chapter on orientations – is that it's the *first* word on the topic, which is meant as a compliment. In the short time since its publication, Holtz' language of orientations has become standard for those who think, read, write, and teach about teaching Bible.

But beyond providing vocabulary, Holtz' presentation of a map of orientations provides a certain kind of focus for research. The identification of different forms of or approaches to teaching enables us to ask deeper and richer questions about those different orientations. Note that this kind of research can proceed regardless of whether one believes that orientations are fundamental, mutually exclusive, and immutable categories (let us call this the 'strong' view of orientations) or whether one believes that an orientation is a rough approximation of a collection of ideas about teaching Bible that typically and contingently, but not necessarily, hangs together (the 'weak' view). According to the strong view, each orientation should have some essential quality that is conceptually distinct from every other; each orientation offers significantly different answers to certain basic questions of methodology and purpose.⁴ According to the weak view, on the other hand, there may be no such essential quality, and it may not be possible to identify those questions of methodology and purpose on which the orientations differ. In fact, it may be the case that distinct orientations are frequently combined in actual teaching with no contradiction and no loss of coherence.⁵ But in either case – that is, certainly according to the strong view but even according to the weak view – the articulation of the different orientations to the teaching of Bible generates new questions, to understand what happens within each one more deeply and with attention to the internal variation within each one.

This paper is an effort to do that kind of exploratory work within one orientation, the Contextual Orientation. In this approach to the teaching of Bible, the teacher strives to present the texts of the Bible in their original context, and to promote the students' understanding of their original meaning in that context. As Holtz writes, "It views the Bible as a record of an ancient civilization, and it hopes to make that world intelligible to students of today" (Holtz, 92). Holtz goes on to note that this orientation is prominent in university settings, and notes further that the Contextual Orientation makes use of "various tools" such as source criticism, form criticism, comparative linguistics, and archeology.

⁴ The rhetoric of a "map" of orientations (Holtz, 2003, pp. 61 ff.) implicitly endorses the strong view, by suggesting that the territory of Bible teaching may be divided up into regions or districts, as on a map, and that a teacher or an observer of an instance of teaching might use the map to figure out where she is, as it were. I have expressed my concern about this image elsewhere ["How to do philosophy of religious education," *Religious Education* 100:1 (2005)].

⁵ Thus, the Contextual Orientation is oriented towards the meaning of the text as it is determined in its original context and the Parshanut Orientation is oriented towards the meaning (or meanings) of the text as it is (or they are) determined by the tradition of classical Jewish interpretation. That kind of example supports the strong view. However, the Ideational Orientation, which focuses on the "big ideas" within the text, functions more as a criterion of selection among meanings rather than an answer to the question of how meaning is determined, and thus might be integrated coherently with either the Contextual or the Parshanut Orientations. To take another example, Personalization – a teaching emphasis on helping students establish and deepen personal connections to the text – can be integrated coherently with the Ideational Orientation, and with Parshanut, and even with the Contextual Orientation. (For the latter possibility, see a manuscript by Jeremy Morrison and Beth Cousens, "A Contextual Framework: The Teaching and Learning of Sacred Jewish Texts With Adults in Their Twenties and Thirties".) Because of these examples, and others, the strong view seems untenable.

This is fine, so far as it goes. The idea of “the text in its context” has an easy familiarity about it; anyone with even a passing knowledge of modern critical Bible scholarship has a sense of what it refers to. The Contextual Orientation, by seeking the meaning that obtained at one particular (distant) time, rejects the idea that the Bible has a suprahistorical and eternal meaning. It also implicitly rejects the theological legitimation of that eternal-meaning thesis, by affirming not only human construction of meaning but also human authorship. It rejects the unity of the text that serves as a cornerstone not only for traditional interpretation but also for contemporary literary critical interpretation. And at the same time, it rejects fancy contemporary theories that fudge the issue by suggesting that meaning is unstable over time.⁶

But what actually happens within the contextual orientation? How does a teacher committed to this orientation organize his or her introduction to the orientation? What are the key themes that the teacher tries to communicate, and how does he or she do so? To begin to answer these questions – or if not to answer them, at least to begin to gain some insight into them – this paper will examine a set of empirical evidence about one teacher, “Moshe”, a university instructor who is committed to teaching within the Contextual Orientation.

More specifically, I will examine how Moshe *introduces* the study of the Bible to his students, in the belief that this is where he articulates the significant features of his method to them. But rather than analyzing just one instance, I will compare how he introduces the Bible in two different contexts: first, in his survey course on Bible at the college where he teaches (“Bible 101”), a course for undergraduates with no prerequisites populated by a mixture of Jews of varying backgrounds, as well as non-Jews; and second, in the opening session of a year-long Jewish adult education program (“Bible for Adults” or “B4A”), a course which is part of an intensive two-year cycle of study. So the title of this paper has two meanings. It is, of course, about how one teacher introduces the contextual orientation to Bible to his students, but the paper itself is intended to function as a kind of introduction to the Contextual Orientation – an introduction which builds on the sketch that Holtz offers because it shows not just the basic commitments and beliefs of the orientation but also something about the internal variation within the Contextual Orientations, and hence begins to reveal some of the pedagogic possibilities.

B. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

For this study, I have analyzed videotapes of two introductory sessions taught by Moshe, one in the university course on Bible and one in the adult education setting. The focus of the videotape is the instructor himself; in these sessions, there is little interaction with the students. The video data is almost exclusively of the sights and sounds of the instructor, with the exception of a question or two from the students. Regardless of the efficacy of frontal models of teaching in general (note that this

⁶ My casual dismissal of “fancy contemporary theories” is intended to represent what I take to be a dominant attitude among contemporary academic scholars of Bible towards theoretical trends, especially those lumped together under the heading of “postmodernism”. This attitude is surely not shared universally, nor is it fair to ignore the internal variation within all those theories that demand that we attend to the instability of meaning. But for the present, and especially for Holtz who wishes to signal the way in which the Contextual Orientation is directed towards original meanings that obtained at some point in the past, it will have to suffice.

study makes no effort to assess efficacy), and regardless of the pedagogic techniques this particular teacher employs at other times, the frontal nature of these two introductory sessions provides a simplified basis for analysis of Moshe's approach to the teaching of the subject.

In other words, the methodology is restricted almost entirely to the close interpretation of what Moshe says, in these teaching situations, in order to pursue the research questions. The analysis takes Moshe's presentation as a text to be interpreted, in order to discern particular teaching moves – intellectual or rhetorical strategies – and the pedagogical ideas that lie behind them. For some readers, this may seem problematic. After all, teaching is far more than just what a teacher says in a classroom. It encompasses the entire process of planning, executing, adjusting, reacting to students, and assessing – all the things a teacher does, not just what a teacher says. Yet, it can hardly be denied that a teacher's direct speech is one significant aspect of the educational encounter that he frames for the students. It's not the sum total of his teaching, but it is an important component, and one that may provide straightforward insight into the teacher's thinking.

Still, some readers may wonder, if we're really trying to understand Moshe's teaching, how is it legitimate to isolate this aspect? And in a related question, how do we know that Moshe's performance for the video camera accurately represents his practice? To address the latter methodological question, regarding the possible contamination of the data, there are three considerations that support the legitimacy of the methodology. First, the focus on the teacher exclusively means that the researcher does not need to worry about self-consciousness or artificiality on the part of the students. Second, this particular teacher has extended experience with recording (via audiotape) of his classes, and so may be assumed to be comfortable with the practice. Third, Moshe himself initiated the recording of the classes, rather than having the data collection imposed by an outsider. The videotaping was actually carried out by a third person, not the researcher.

All this is no guarantee, of course, but then again, teaching practice is *never* 'pure', i.e. unobserved. The notion that the most accurate depiction of teaching would be one with no students to contaminate the data is clearly absurd. But more generally, the methodology is not designed in any case to access the truth about the Moshe's approach to Bible. This is the answer to the more general question at the beginning of the previous paragraph, about isolating Moshe's introductory lecture. It matters not at all whether this lecture is representative or not. The purpose of the study is to generate insight, through the comparison of the two cases, into the enactment of the Contextual Orientation in practice. The reason to examine the empirical evidence is that it presents us with a rich example of actual teaching with genuine tensions and real patterns of similarities and differences; the success of the study will be measured not by whether it gets Moshe right but whether it discloses something significant about the orientation.

Furthermore, it is also important to clarify that no effort is made here to *evaluate* the teaching. Is Moshe a "good" teacher? This question, however, is not the kind of question that can be answered in advance of articulating a specific vision of good teaching. So perhaps the questions ought to be about "best practices": Is this the best way to teach? Or, is this the best way to teach these particular ideas? But there is no reason to think that there is any one best way to pursue a practice as

complicated as teaching, or that the dilemmas of teaching are ever capable of being resolved. We might therefore turn to other kinds of evaluative questions: Did the students learn whatever Moshe wanted them to learn? What other effects, positive or negative, did his teaching have? These questions, about assessing impact, are centrally important for pedagogic purposes and are certainly worth pursuing. But they too are irrelevant to the present study, which will certainly engage in critical discussion of ideas but makes no attempt to assess the teaching and the learning that may or may not occur as a result. Again, the goal is insight and deeper understanding, not evaluation.

Note that this is not the only possible research design to achieve these goals. Another obvious possibility would be to gather data on two different teachers teaching the same material, both within the Contextual Orientation. That research design would certainly tell us something interesting about the variety of possible approaches, and is worthy of pursuit. However, it would have to cope with the thorny question of teacher knowledge, i.e., of what the two teachers really know and believe about their subject, and whether those two sets of understandings are really comparable. In the present research design, that question is avoided entirely: we can assume that what Moshe knows about his subject in one setting is identical with what he knows about his subject in the other. Of course, one does not always simply teach what one knows; a teacher might have reasons for using one orientation in one setting, and a different orientation in another. Fortunately, in this case, Moshe is committed to teaching within the Contextual Orientation in *both* Bible 101 and Bible for Adults, so this problem is averted. To put it more positively: by holding the variables of the teacher and the orientation constant while varying the setting, this comparative study is in the position to generate insight about the ways in which the Contextual Orientation is presented and, moreover, about some of the challenges of doing so.

A final obvious and important question is whether the researcher should present the findings to the subject of the study, not just for ethical reasons but for methodological ones. Moshe might corroborate some findings and reject others. Moreover, Moshe might have answers to questions about why he did or did not do certain things; in that way, the analysis of the data would function as a step towards greater insight into a teacher's unarticulated or possibly unconscious pedagogical decision-making. For the present paper, I have not taken this further step in a systematic way, because while it is certainly worth doing, attention to pedagogic decision-making will inevitably distract from the focus on the features of the pedagogy itself. This study is more interested in what happens and less interested in why (in terms of the teacher's motives, conscious or unconscious). Indeed, just as an author is not always the appropriate authority on the meaning of a text,⁷ so too a practitioner may

⁷ This is clearly not the place to launch a discussion of the issue of authorial intent in textual interpretation. But my use of the adverb "not always" is intended to signal my view that the issue must be pursued in the light of particular contexts. Is the author's intention the criterion of correctness in interpretation? Well, sometimes authorial intent is exactly what interpretation seeks to represent. Moshe Halbertal, in his *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Harvard, 1997, p.27 ff.), offers the example of inheritors attempting to interpret a will (assuming that they are doing so in good faith). At other times, it is clear that authorial intent is of little concern. For example, when we examine an historical document for evidence about social or cultural conditions of the time, we simply do not care whether the author of the document intended her writing as evidence or not. So, too, sometimes it is important that we ask a practitioner for the reasons why he did certain things, for example when we are trying to understand practitioners' thinking. But at other times – for example, when we are trying to understand or assess the impact of an action – the reasons matter less or not at all. So it's wrong to claim either that authorial intent is the proper criterion of meaning, or that it is not. A better answer is that it depends: it depends on the genre that we assign to the text and the questions that we are interested in pursuing about the text in any particular inquiry.

not always be the most insightful analyst of his practice. Particularly when it comes to working out some features of the internal variation within the Contextual Orientation, what is significant is not, or at least not primarily, *why* a teacher chooses to do what he does but rather the very fact that there are choices here to be made among interesting possibilities.⁸

C. A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE TWO CLASSES

Having considered the methodological issues, we can now return to the basic question: How does one introduce the Bible within the Contextual Orientation? Moshe adopts two different approaches in the two settings. In the university introduction to Bible, Bible 101, Moshe sits at a desk in front of an open laptop computer and begins with some warm-up welcoming sentences. He then opens his argument – the session is framed as a series of arguments, with evidence to support the theses – with a statement about the reasons that one ought to be interested in the Bible. “I honestly believe,” Moshe declares, “that the Bible is an extremely profound text, that deals with a set of issues that are still relevant.” Developing his argument, Moshe then proceeds to show (via a PowerPoint presentation that generates slides projected on a screen behind him) particular passages from the Bible that relate to a series of supposedly relevant issues: first texts that depict God, then texts that discuss death, then texts that are in some sense about gender. After working through these texts for approximately 10 minutes, he then transitions to some methodological comments about how the Bible will be studied in this course (which I will discuss further below). Finally, after pausing for questions, he shifts his tone and begins to discuss some practical aspects of the course, regarding the syllabus, the work, assessment, etc.

In the adult education setting, Bible for Adults, Moshe also sits at a desk, but without a laptop; instead, he has before him a Tanakh and his notes. Instead of a screen behind him, he has a whiteboard off to his left, on which he writes once or twice in his introduction. In this setting, after his warm-up welcome, he explains that the purpose of this first class session is to provide “four contexts” for the course as a whole: the geographical context of the Bible, the historical context, the context of the structures of the Bible, and what he calls the “contexts of interpretation.” He then proceeds to work through each of these contexts.

First, the geographical context is actually not just about the geographical location of ancient Israel between the great powers of Mesopotamia and Egypt but, more specifically, about the *significance* of that geographical location on the self-understanding of ancient Israelites and impact of that self-understanding on their culture and its product, the Bible. Second, in order to provide the historical context, Moshe focuses especially on the standard periodization of ancient Israelite history, i.e., how to sub-divide the overall biblical narrative into units. Third, he explains the “context of the structures of the Bible” by opening up his Tanakh and describing its component parts and their order. And finally, Moshe concludes by tackling the “contexts of interpretation.” He describes the tradi-

⁸ A model here is Sam Wineburg and Suzanne Wilson’s delightful study of two accomplished History teachers, “Models of Wisdom in the Teaching of History,” reprinted as chapter 7 in Wineburg’s *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Temple, 2001). In that case, the teachers seem to be employing something like different orientations to the teaching of History, rather than operating within one orientation, but the emphasis of the paper is to reveal the differences rather than to explain them.

tional interpretive approach to the Bible, which assumes that the text is “privileged,” and then proceeds to describe the contrasting, critical interpretive approach that de-privileges the text. Spinoza serves as a model, here, for the interpreter who uses reason rather than tradition as the criterion of meaning, and Moshe makes it clear that this course, B4A, will follow Spinoza’s lead (again, I will have more to say about this below).

D. COMMONALITIES BETWEEN THE TWO SETTINGS

The preceding cursory sketch begins to reveal some important differences between the two courses, most dramatically in terms of the basic structure of the session. But before proceeding to analyze the data in greater detail, it is also important to spell out the commonalities. I have already belabored the point that in each of the two introductions to the Bible that are the focus of this study, the teacher is the same; Moshe is the same person, with the same intellectual and personal experiences. More importantly than the consistency of his personality, we can assume that he holds the same knowledge about his subject, the same background knowledge about Bible and the nature of the field of Biblical studies. And in addition to and alongside his subject matter knowledge is his methodological commitment to the Contextual Orientation, which is the same in both settings. In fact, in a personal communication, Moshe recalled that when he first began to teach Bible for Adults, he simply took his syllabus from Bible 101 and adapted it to account for the difference in available class time.⁹

Beyond these commonalities regarding the instructor, close analysis of Moshe’s introductions suggest three pedagogic values¹⁰ that appear in each. First, in each setting, he is aware of the potentially problematic nature of the subject matter. He knows, that is, that teaching the Bible as a text written by humans over several centuries may not sit well with the religious commitments of some of his students. This does not alter his commitment to the Contextual Orientation, but he does take the time to acknowledge this difficulty. Some might assume that this kind of acknowledgement is appropriate in the case of the adult education program, with its explicit Jewish educational mission, but is inappropriate in Bible 101. Others might assume that it is appropriate for university students, in late adolescence, but less relevant for the mature and autonomous individuals in B4A. For Moshe, on the other hand, it is appropriate to directly acknowledge the problematic nature of the subject matter – indeed, it is apparently necessary – in *both* settings. This is the first example of a pedagogic practice that represents an underlying pedagogic value.

In addition, two other pedagogic values common to the two settings emerge from the data: the centrality of text and the use of personal voice. *Centrality of text*: in each case, Moshe is not satisfied

⁹ Since that time, each of these two courses – the university course and the adult education course – have developed along their own independent trajectories over many years, according to Moshe. While the present paper focuses only on the introductory session, it would be interesting to compare the two courses as a whole, in their current incarnations, to understand the similarities and differences between them. It would also be interesting to understand those trajectories, i.e., the development of Bible 101 over time and the parallel development of B4A over time.

¹⁰ I am using “values” somewhat loosely, to signal a sphere that is distinct from Moshe’s subject matter knowledge on the one hand (addressed above) and from his objectives on the other (addressed below). Within this sphere, I am identifying three pedagogic practices that are not mere techniques or strategies but that seem to represent some deeper convictions about teaching, and not just teaching in general but about teaching this specific subject.

talking *about* texts but, before much time passes, turns to texts themselves in order to show them to the students. This seems to be an important piece of his pedagogy, representing not just a strategy or a method but indeed a value, suggesting that the class will be a place where texts themselves are heard and encountered. *Use of personal voice*: despite his commitment to an orientation associated with objective scholarship, Moshe is not afraid to express his own voice in the classroom, making his presence felt as a student of the text, and as a person. This too is apparently a pedagogic value for him. Evidence for each of these features of his teaching will be apparent in what follows.

Finally, the analysis of Moshe’s teaching suggests that there are four key pedagogical objectives that are common to both settings. These four key objectives, which are to a certain extent related, are as follows. First, Moshe wants students to appreciate the *internal diversity* of the text. Second, Moshe sees his role as *subverting preconceptions* that students bring to the text.¹¹ Third, Moshe wants his students to establish some *critical distance* from the text. But fourth, perhaps a bit surprisingly, there is evidence in each setting that Moshe explicitly *preserves the possibility of personal meaning*; that is, he finds ways to make room for students to establish or maintain personal connections to the text, despite the obvious tension between this kind of connection and the Contextual Orientation within which he teaches.

The following chart recapitulates the commonalities between the two settings.

Moshe’s subject matter knowledge and beliefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of Bible • Commitment to Contextual Orientation
Moshe’s pedagogic values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Awareness of problematic nature of the subject B. Promotion of the centrality of the text C. Use of personal voice
Moshe’s pedagogical objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fostering appreciation of internal diversity of the text 2. Subverting preconceptions about the text 3. Establishing critical distance from the text 4. Preserving the possibility of personal meaning

Are these the only commonalities? Surely not – but these are the significant features that emerge from my analysis. The first category, regarding the teacher’s subject matter knowledge, is straightforward; having already discussed it in the context of the methodological background to this study,

¹¹ I do not know and cannot say why he sees his role in this way. One hypothesis is that it is a feature of the Contextual Orientation, given the role that the Bible plays in the religious lives of some students and the expectation that students will come with preconceptions that will stand in tension with the orientation. However, there are also (at least) two other possibilities. It may be that subverting preconceptions is a helpful technique to use in an introductory session, when a teacher is trying to engage his students and to establish the value of the course of study ahead of them. On this theory, subverting preconceptions is a strategy for hooking students on the subject matter and for getting them to return to the course. Or perhaps Moshe believes, not without reason, that subverting preconceptions is a productive pedagogic technique to use *in general*, perhaps in the conviction that real learning only occurs when one’s prior expectations are disrupted. On this theory, subverting preconceptions is always the goal of good teaching. (On the question of whether the researcher should simply ask the subject why he does what he does, see the final methodological consideration above.)

it can be set aside. (That is why I have only marked it by bullets in the chart above.) But in order to supply evidence for the commonalities in the second and third categories (“values” and “objectives”), and in particular to demonstrate how Moshe strives to accomplish the four key objectives, and most generally to provide the kind of thick description that can help the reader understand Moshe’s teaching in greater depth, I will now turn to a closer analysis of selected moments in each of the two sessions.

E. INTRODUCING THE BIBLE IN BIBLE 101: A CLOSER ANALYSIS

As described above, Moshe begins Bible 101 with a statement about the Bible as a source of answers to important questions. He says:

The real reason that interests me, and will interest us throughout this class, is that I honestly believe that the Bible is an extremely profound text, that deals with a set issues that are still relevant. Issues such as: How and why should one bother living? How should one die? What’s the proper way to treat other people? What is the Other? ... It [i.e., the Bible] almost never has a single answer.

Thus, he begins with an emphasis on profundity and relevance: the issues that he raises are profound ones, i.e., they are fundamental human-existential questions that are eternally relevant. Moshe suggests, although he doesn’t actually say here, that the answers that one finds in the Bible to these questions may be profound as well. That is: the questions are relevant, and the answers just may be relevant as well.

Three analytical points are important here. First, it seems particularly significant that Moshe opens by introducing the idea that students of the Bible may find personal meaning in the text – *preserving the possibility of personal meaning* – not necessarily religious meaning, but certainly personal existential meaning. As if to anticipate the challenge that the Contextual Orientation robs the text of meaning, Moshe affirms the opposite right at the outset. Second, this emphasis on profundity and relevance is a difference between the university class and the adult education class. While he does preserve the possibility of personal meaning in other ways in B4A (about which more below), he does not suggest that the Biblical text deals with profound or relevant issues; that claim is entirely absent. Third, and most importantly, Moshe moves almost immediately from his initial argument about the relevance of the text – an argument about why students ought to study the text – to an argument about how they ought to study it: namely, with an eye towards the internal variation within it.¹²

Thus, the conclusion to the paragraph quoted above – “It almost never has a single answer” – serves as a transition to the next stage of Moshe’s teaching, in which he presents passages on God, death, and sex/gender.¹³ Each of these themes represents a relevant issue, in some sense (although notably,

¹² There’s a relationship between these two, of course. Without the argument for the diversity within the text, precisely on the profound questions that Moshe has identified, one might conclude that the reason to study the text is to discover the Biblical position on, e.g., why one should bother living, perhaps because that position (the Biblical view) is the correct one. The introduction of diversity disrupts that conclusion, instead demanding a far more complicated argument about the value of confronting multiple answers to profound questions (along with, perhaps, some argument about why these answers in particular are worth confronting).

¹³ Moshe uses the term “sex” but the passages that he introduces are not about sex in the sense of intercourse nor about sex in the biological sense but rather about gender. I will therefore simply refer to this theme as “gender” from this point forward.

these themes are different from the human-existential questions that Moshe offered as examples above). Each provides Moshe with the opportunity to move from talking about the text to showing the text itself, introducing actual texts into the discussion not more than a few minutes into the very first class session. As noted above, the *centrality* of the text is clearly an important aspect of Moshe's teaching. And each of them provides an opportunity to demonstrate internal variation in the Bible.

However, the discussion of the themes of God, death, and gender does more than just fostering an appreciation of the diversity within the text. In the course of discussing the Biblical view of God, Moshe displays passages from Deuteronomy and Exodus, and then says as follows:

So when you take the very first text up here, which comes from the book of Deuteronomy, where you have the notion that there is no perceived shape of God – had I given you a pop quiz at the beginning and said, “What does God look like according to the Hebrew Bible?”, the odds are relatively good that that is, if not the text, the conception or the preconception that many people might have had. (And again, if you had said, “But I’ve never opened the Bible,” that’s fine too. This course truly has no prerequisites.) But compare that text to the second text, from the book of Exodus, where a bunch of people – here I just have the pronoun “they;” it’s not terribly important who it is – see God. It can’t be any clearer: “And they saw the God of Israel.”

Moshe is promoting the idea, here, of the internal diversity on such an important question as the nature of the Divine. But he is also implicitly promoting the idea of reading the text in its plain sense, like any other text, without the overlay of theological assumptions. “It can’t be any clearer,” he declares, employing the rhetorical device favored by every interpreter who strives for the plain sense. In fact, the parenthetical comment about prerequisites – which Moshe utters slowly and carefully – is not merely an attempt to reassure students who have little background. It is, rather, a methodological statement about the way that the text will be studied, and indeed a conviction about how it *ought* to be studied.

And in addition, this passage is an example of the phenomenon to which I referred above, namely, *subverting preconceptions*: Moshe transitions from describing the diversity of the text to explicitly questioning the preconceptions of the students. “It can’t be any clearer” – but for some students, it is not at all clear, precisely because of the preconceptions to which he refers.¹⁴ Pausing here to consider this phenomenon, it’s possible to identify three distinct ways in which that subversion occurs. First, implicitly, Moshe begins the session by subverting a possible preconception that the text is irrelevant or antiquated, instead affirming that its issues are profound ones. Second, Moshe then subverts a more significant preconception about the text, namely, that the text presents a unified position on important questions, by demonstrating the diversity within the text. But third, and most

¹⁴ Considering this point in the context of the previous one, there’s an interesting paradox here: to the extent that there are no prerequisites for Bible 101, that students really have no background in the study of the Bible, the process of subverting preconceptions will not work. Preconceptions, after all, come from prior exposure to the text. So one might wonder whether, despite his rejection of prerequisites, Moshe’s course does have prerequisites simply because his pedagogy *needs* student preconceptions as the basic material with which to work. But this is not a critique of Moshe; it is rather an aspect of the Gadamerian insight that *all* interpretation is preceded by preconceptions of the text, and cannot be otherwise.

explicitly, here he moves towards subverting assumptions about what the Bible actually says, about its ideological content, by showing passages that contradict those assumptions.¹⁵

Moshe continues his presentation of passages that represent both the internal diversity within the Bible and that work to subvert preconceptions about what the Bible says about God and death, but when he gets to gender, he pauses to acknowledge that some of the passages that he will be presenting may be offensive to modern ears. He then offers a comment that seems to be a kind of signature line, because he repeats the exact same line in B4A: “I *teach* the Bible; I did not *write* the Bible. I am not *responsible* for all of the thoughts that the Bible contains.”

The line works. It’s pithy, and funny, and elicits laughter from the students. It defuses the possibility of discomfort in reading these texts, or at least diminishes that discomfort. And it accomplishes this by setting up the Bible as a text from which Moshe is able to *establish some critical distance* – and of course he’s recommending that the students establish some critical distance as well. Moshe is passionate about the text, and commits his life to the study of it; the students should be able to see that that is a legitimate option. But he is not responsible for it, or more precisely, he is not responsible for *all* of it. He reserves the right to disavow the text or some aspect of the text. The students should be able to see that that, too, is a legitimate option.

This establishment of critical distance, I have claimed, is a central objective of Moshe’s teaching. It is an aspect of the Contextual Orientation that Holtz does not make explicit, and one that most academic scholars of Bible would not think to mention as a hallmark of their methodology because it goes unnoticed, like the air that we breathe. But more than the particulars of the history of the composition of the Biblical texts, more than the pursuit of the original meaning of the text in its ancient Near Eastern context, this idea – that I am not responsible for all the thoughts that the Bible contains – may well be the core principle of the Contextual Orientation. One can still struggle to understand texts that are difficult for various reasons – historical, logical, cosmological, or ethical – but ultimately one’s responsibility is limited.

But how does Moshe actually *teach* this critical distance? First, he teaches it by calling attention to it. He does not use the term “critical distance” here but the invocation of a limitation of responsibility for the text is no less powerful and perhaps even more appropriate. Beyond this, however, he teaches critical distance by demonstrating what it looks like, by modeling how one approaches a text in this way. It is striking that the signature line in which he establishes critical distance is constructed in the first person. “I teach the Bible; I did not write the Bible; I am not responsible for all the thoughts that the Bible contains.” It’s all about Moshe, because he is presenting himself as a potential role model. He never says, “I am not responsible for the all the thoughts that the Bible contains and neither are you”; that degree of direction would seem inappropriate. But the implication is

¹⁵ One might wonder how Moshe knows that the students come with the preconceptions that he seeks to subvert. Presumably, this knowledge is generated by a combination of his experience with students such as these over many years and his more general understanding of the ways that the Bible has been interpreted and the cultural significance of those interpretations. But this knowledge is, quite literally, a preconception about the students – a preconception about their preconceptions. This point reminds us that, just as it is impossible to approach a text without preconceptions, so too it is impossible to approach teaching (or any practice) without them.

that he, Moshe, is a living model of what it means to relate to the text in this way, to hold it at some critical distance even as one is passionately invested in it and devoted to it. This person standing before you, says Moshe, did not write the Bible – but he does teach it. And you students, therefore, should be able to envisage, perhaps for the first time, holding the text as some critical distance but yet committing yourselves in its study.

Immediately after offering this signature line, Moshe segues back to his argument about the internal diversity of the text, and then transitions to the final arguments of his introduction. This is an extraordinarily rich set of sentences, so I will quote them at length before offering my analysis of them. Moshe says:

I teach the Bible; I did not *write* the Bible. I am not responsible for all of the thoughts that the Bible contains.

And the point is, really: all the thoughts that the Bible contains. Because the Bible is a very complex book. And the way in which we are going to explain this complexity in class is the way that complexity would be explained in any class that deals with History or any class that deals with History of Religion, namely, to realize that the Bible as a complex text is written over a one thousand year period, in a variety of places, by a variety of people coming from different social settings, perhaps even people of different genders, and as such, even though it is included between two covers, there is no reason to assume that there is a fundamental unity to this text.

I want to briefly say something that perhaps I'll come back to later in the semester and that I'm happy to discuss in more detail out of class. It might seem to some of you that the particular position that I am taking concerning the Bible and its origin is an anti-religious position. That is not something that I am intending to do. Rather, I am interested in reading Biblical texts closely, within the context, or contexts, of ancient Israel that engendered these particular texts, and using this ancient history, and these ancient backgrounds, to help us explain what the Bible meant.

Thus, if you are listening to me carefully ... one might make a distinction between what the Bible meant and ... what the Bible means. What the Bible means is an issue which is up to every individual; that is a highly personal issue, and in fact the Bible might mean nothing! What the Bible meant is a different issue, and is connected to the fact that this was produced by a particular culture in antiquity. And my interest in this particular class is, by and large, understanding what it meant to that particular culture.

Having discussed the intellectual issues that he had intended to address in this introductory session, Moshe next turns to procedural issues regarding student responsibilities and so on. These lines, therefore, serve as a conclusion to his substantive introduction to the course.

This passage suggests four points of analysis. First, Moshe makes explicit that the point of showing the internal diversity within the Biblical texts is to introduce the human authorship of the Bible. How could a text be so self-contradictory? The question is not *resolved* by focusing on the history of its composition, but it certainly loses some of its bite: the redactor was good but not perfect, and tensions between sources remain (perhaps even intentionally). However, it's particularly interesting to note, here, that the examples that Moshe has introduced to undermine the assumption of "fundamental unity" are not the kinds of glaring distinctions that give rise to source criticism in the first place. In other words, in introducing the Contextual Orientation, Moshe does not merely recapitulate the

history of Biblical interpretation. He does not point to the two Creation stories, for example, or to the contradictory slave laws (as he does in the adult education setting, B4A). Instead, he chooses texts that are less typical and less technical but more dramatic, more appropriate to these particular students – or perhaps, more helpful in subverting the students’ particular preconceptions.

In addition, Moshe inserts a comparison of Bible to other fields, almost in passing, saying that the method of the course will be just like that of other historical inquiries. This rhetorical move legitimates the academic study of Bible within the university, since it is just like “any class that deals with History,” but it is not quite compelling. That is, Moshe claims that the solution to the problem of complexity is to recognize multiple sources and development over time. But surely this is not the only way to deal with complexity in the study of History! Moreover, the choice of History as the basis of comparison is, itself, not self-evident. Literature, after all, typically approaches text with a different sensibility about complexity and about what kinds of explanations are valuable.¹⁶ Given these logical weaknesses, the comparison to other fields is that much more striking; clearly, Moshe wants to convey a message about the academic legitimacy of the path on which they are about to embark.

The third point of analysis regarding this long passage, on the other hand, is a reaction against that very message. The idea of Bible as a field like any other, with no particular special features, is belied by Moshe’s attention to the question of whether his approach is “anti-religious.” One can hardly imagine this question emerging so prominently in a course on the history of the French Revolution or the history of Ancient Greece. Instead, his concern with this question represents Moshe’s *awareness of the problematic nature of the subject* in the way that he has chosen to teach it. It also, at the same time, represents his use of *personal voice*. Another teacher might have addressed the issue from an objective standpoint. But Moshe chooses to talk about his own intentions and interests, in the first person. “That is not something I am intending to do,” he claims, referring to the adoption of a position that might be identified as “anti-religious.” And he then continues: “Rather, I am interested in reading Biblical texts closely.” The prominence of Moshe’s own persona here is striking. Implicitly, Moshe is telling his students that he, Moshe, represents an option that they might consider adopting for themselves, a critical position that is not anti-religious. And while he can only signal the existence of the position at this point, he mentions that he will return to it later in the course and, even more significantly, explicitly invites students to talk about it with him outside of class.¹⁷

The fourth and final point of analysis regarding this passage has to do with Moshe’s distinction between what the Bible *means* and what it *meant*. In my view, this distinction does not hold up. After all, consider the fact that “what the Bible meant” is inextricably bound up with “what the

¹⁶ The distinction between History and Literature is overstated here, given the significance of literary techniques in the study of historical texts, on the one hand, and of historical background in the study of literature, on the other. Nevertheless, the distinction is important for the purpose of critically examining Moshe’s claim about the solution to the problem of complexity.

¹⁷ Consider, by way of contrast, that he does not invite students to talk with him about God or death or gender, or to talk about the intricacies of source criticism, or anything else. He is surely willing to talk about those topics, if asked, but the only topic that he actively *invites* students to talk about is the methodological one, i.e., the topic on which he is an expert not (or not merely) because of what he *knows* but rather because of who and what he is.

Bible means” for at least one person in that room – namely, Moshe himself! This suggests that we cannot neatly demarcate and distinguish the historical inquiry from the personal search for present (perhaps existential) meaning. A stronger way to put this point is to say that every historical claim is a claim about what the meaning of the text is, because when an historian advances an argument about the meaning of the text, she would not (and should not) be satisfied to say that this is “merely” what the text meant at one point in time. And conversely, every claim about what the text means, in the present, that seeks to be compelling or persuasive incorporates implicit claims about what it *has* meant; an interpreter would not (or should not) be satisfied to say that this is a new meaning of the text, simply invented at this very moment. Moreover, the suggestion that there is a realm of personal meaning-making that is unconstrained by any demands for arguments and evidence rings false. But setting aside this quarrel about hermeneutics, it should be apparent here that Moshe is offering an open door for those who want to participate in the course but who are worried about the loss of a personal or existential relationship to the text. He is, in other words, attempting to *preserve the possibility of personal meaning*, even as he explains the orientational commitment that will guide their study together – a commitment to the Contextual Orientation.

F. INTRODUCING THE BIBLE IN B4A: A CLOSER ANALYSIS

The preceding section of this paper offered an analysis of key sections of Moshe’s teaching in Bible 101, focusing in particular on the data that provides evidence for the common features of Moshe’s teaching mentioned above: (A) his awareness of the problematic nature of the subject, (B) his emphasis on the centrality of the text and (C) his use of personal voice, as well as his four pedagogical objectives: (1) fostering an appreciation of internal diversity of the text, (2) subverting preconceptions about the text, (3) establishing critical distance from the text, and (4) preserving the possibility of personal meaning. This section will focus on the same themes in the second setting, Bible for Adults.

As noted in the brief overview of this class above, Moshe adopts a different approach to the introduction of the Bible in B4A than he does in Bible 101. He does not entice these students with the promise that the Bible deals with profound and relevant issues as he did for the college students; he does not address their preconceptions directly as he did by talking about the various texts about God; he does not introduce and emphasize the internal diversity within the Bible here as he did there. Instead, he opens by offering a clear and explicit outline of the session, in which he will discuss “four contexts” for the course as a whole. These contexts are the geographical context, the historical context, the context of the structure of the Bible, and what he calls “the contexts of interpretation.”

This may seem a bit surprising, for a number of reasons. One might think that adult students, who are not taking the course for credit and whom an instructor may have to convince to return, need to be enticed even more than college students. One might also think that college students need an advance organizer even more than adults, who presumably are both more experienced at assimilating new knowledge and less anxious about getting every detail. Here, however, it is important to keep in mind that B4A is a year-long course that is constructed to resemble a university course. These adult students are expected to commit to attend the entire course, and in fact, are expected to commit to the entire two-year cycle of study of which B4A is a part. Thus, B4A is hardly a typical adult education setting.

Beyond these elements, the structure of the opening session may seem surprising because it is so dryly academic, apparently ignoring the pedagogic values and objectives that were emphasized above. But this is not the case. In fact, the very first element – the Geographical Context – turns out to be crucially important for Moshe’s purposes in teaching within the Contextual Orientation. He does offer a straightforward description of the geographical location of ancient Israel, but he quickly moves from geographical facts to the *significance* of those facts.

In fact, as he begins to explain that significance, he calls attention to what he is about to say in an extraordinary way. “I’m going to make a claim which is going to sound a little odd,” he says, “but it is true.” He then continues by calling attention to his odd-sounding claim even further. “Unless you remember that it is true, you’re not going to be able to appreciate the Bible.” So this claim is not only odd, and not only true, but crucially important! What is this claim?

The claim is very simple: Israel is a small hick country, a latecomer into the world of antiquity, and it is stuck between the two great imperial powers, the power of Mesopotamia and the power of Egypt.

Thus, the important but simple claim is a claim about what ancient Israel was, as a political and cultural entity, from an objective perspective, independent of how it conceived of itself or how those with some familial or religious connection to ancient Israel (e.g., Jews or Christians) might conceive of it today.

Why is this claim so important? Or more accurately: why is it so important to Moshe’s teaching that he emphasizes it to such a degree? First, it’s important because the kind of objectivity that the claim represents is a hallmark of the Contextual Orientation, which is attuned not only to the objective value of the text but also strives for an objective characterization of the historical periods that the text depicts.¹⁸ Beyond this, however, a second reason that Moshe emphasizes this point is that it serves one of his main pedagogic objectives, namely, *establishing critical distance*. It does so in a less subtle way than by declaring “I am not responsible for all the thoughts that the Bible contains,” as Moshe did in Bible 101. And indeed, the critical distance that it establishes here in B4a is not precisely identical with the critical distance established by the declaration there in Bible 101. In the case of Bible 101, the critical distance has to do with denying responsibility for the entirety of the text and thus opening up the possibility that some aspects of the texts – some laws or some moral positions or perspectives – are or ought to be subject to critique. In B4A, on the other hand, the critical distance is rather a matter of calling into question the self-representation of the text, of beginning to develop a hermeneutics of suspicion.¹⁹

How does this work? The idea of Israel as a “latecomer,” an idea that Moshe clearly assumes is new

¹⁸ This is not the place, of course, for a nuanced account of the nature of objectivity in Biblical studies or the study of the history of ancient Israel. But setting epistemological debates aside, it should not be particularly controversial to note that the Contextual Orientation typically aspires to objectivity, at least in the sense of a broader perspective informed by the historical context.

¹⁹ The phrase “hermeneutics of suspicion” was apparently coined by Paul Ricoeur, in his *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. D. Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 32, who used it to refer to a mode of interpretation represented especially by Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, in which the interpreter assumes that the surface or naïve meaning of a text (or a person’s utterances) mask a deeper political or sexual meaning. This mode of interpretation has its excesses, to be sure, but fundamentally, the stance of suspicion about the self-representation of a text is a hallmark of any critical inquiry.

to the students, is not of course present in the Biblical text. It is not the kind of characterization that a person offers about himself or a nation declares about itself. It is, rather, an assessment or characterization that can only be offered when one stands outside of the situation. And more importantly, once one begins to think in this way about ancient Israel, once one is willing and able to hold up the self-representation of the text for critical examination, one is now open to the possibility of asking the all-important question, “Why would the Biblical author have written (or believed) this?” The naïveté of accepting the Biblical account and the Biblical perspective at face value is subtly undermined, if not immediately shattered. The text now becomes a political document, a document that bolsters or undermines particular political and ideological positions in ancient Israel or at least emerges out of those positions. The text seeks to advance certain causes or suppress others; it is now seen to be *doing* something, not merely *saying* something.²⁰

But Moshe does not merely emphasize the importance of this claim; he prefaces it by acknowledging that it is going to sound odd to the students but that it is, nonetheless, true. This introduction is an indication that Moshe recognizes the *problematic nature of the subject matter*. The students may not realize, at first, the implications of the innocuous statement, “Israel is a latecomer nation”; they may not immediately grasp the significance as I’ve laid it out in the previous paragraph. But if they do come to understand and believe that idea, the door is open for new interpretive possibilities. And Moshe recognizes its significance, intuitively at least, which is why he is led to emphasize the point and to insist that it is vital for their understanding of the text. Moreover, Moshe recognizes that this will be a new idea for them, and one which may not fit with their prior understanding of the place of Israel in the ancient Near East. In other words, he is also engaged here in subverting preconceptions. To be more precise, he is engaged in *subverting preconceptions* on two levels: a specific preconception about the significance of ancient Israel on the world stage and, more generally, a preconception about the reliability of the self-presentation of the Biblical texts.

And as he continues, a third preconception emerges, this time quite explicitly.

If anyone grew up with the idea that Israel is the first great society, or Israel is the first great writing society, or that there is nothing comparable to Israelite literature, Israelite philosophy, Israelite religious notions in the ancient Near East, the function of the next 10 to 15 minutes is to disabuse you of any of those notions.

The specific preconception in question is the notion of Israel’s unique cultural creativity or religious genius. Not only does Moshe point to the specific preconceptions that he intends to subvert, but he even mentions where the students might have gotten those preconceptions – in their childhood, as part of their growing up, presumably as a result of parochial notions instilled through Jewish education or Jewish worship.

²⁰ As I have said above, this paper is not interested in the actual effects of Moshe’s teaching on the students. But certain moments of my analysis call out for an investigation into what the students learn, and this is a good example of that. How do students react to this “establishing of critical distance”? Do they make the connection between the geographical claim and the implications for how to read the text? My analysis, in the end, is an elaborate working out of the subtleties of possible teaching intentions and possible effects on students. But what kind of impact do statements such as “Israel is a latecomer nation,” or “I am not responsible for all the thoughts that the Bible contains,” actually have on real students in real settings?

Moshe then continues by moving into a kind of meta-cognitive position, trying to help the students understand what they're supposed to be learning.

And really, what [this adult education program] is about and what this class is about, is not proving that Israel is better ... but rather to help you focus on what the Bible meant in its original context.

Moshe thus declares his allegiance to the Contextual Orientation, at the same time echoing the distinction that he offered at the end of the Bible 101 introduction by invoking the idea of “what the Bible meant” as the goal of the class. This course, B4A,²¹ has a goal that stands in opposition to what might typically be considered appropriate for a Jewish educational setting. Moshe is not interested in claims of the literary or religious superiority of the Bible or of ancient Israel; he is apparently not interested in promoting personal connections to the text. He is simply interested in original meanings.

But how does a teacher actually subvert (or as Moshe says “disabuse”) the students of preconceptions about the uniqueness of ancient Israel? Moshe’s technique is to introduce students to other sources, demonstrating his commitment to what I have called the *centrality of texts* – not just talking about texts but engaging with texts directly. He introduces some ancient Near Eastern prayers in order to show similarities and differences with prayers that are familiar to his students from the Jewish tradition. Then, after quoting a line from an unnamed ancient Near Eastern text (“In ignorance I have eaten that forbidden by my god”), he pauses.

Let me just let that sink in for a second. Some of you might have thought ... that food taboos were unique to ancient Israel. Sorry.

And he continues with the next line from the text (“In ignorance I have set foot on that prohibited by my goddess”) and pauses again.

Oh! You might have thought that the notion of sacred space ... is a uniquely Israelite idea. Sorry.

In each case, Moshe “apologizes” for disrupting preconceptions, but of course he’s not really sorry at all. This has been his purpose all along.²²

He concludes this section by reiterating his argument, the argument that he had earlier asserted to be both true and crucially important:

Thus, coming back to my main point: Do not envision Israel coming into the world of cavemen, lacking sophistication. Literarily, technologically – to say it one last time – Israel was a latecomer into a world dominated by the two great civilizations of Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt.

²¹ While Moshe actually talks about the adult education program as a whole, it is clear from the context that he is referring to the Bible course (B4A) within the larger program.

²² Moshe’s inauthentic “apology” may seem a little harsh or insensitive; there’s an implication that the students will just have to deal with the reality that their preconceptions about Israel’s uniqueness are misguided. Note, however, that the examples that he uses here are hardly the most controversial ones that he could find. Anyone with even the most superficial introduction to the anthropology of religion would know that ancient Israel is not the only culture to employ food taboos or the notion of sacred space! I suspect that it is no coincidence that his tone seems insensitive only at this moment where so little is riding on the examples.

Ancient Israel is not unique. It was not the first great culture. It did not invent the genre of sacred literature. Those are preconceptions that must be subverted if one is to understand the Bible. Instead, Israel is a latecomer nation. That's a new idea that *must* be embraced if one is to understand the Bible, an idea that opens up new possibilities by creating critical distance and allowing the reader to begin to ask questions about how the Bible reacts against the political and cultural contexts in which its authors found themselves. Geographical context, it turns out, is much more than reading the map. In fact, it holds the key to the Contextual Orientation as a whole.

From this point in Moshe's teaching, I want to skip over his discussion of the second and third contexts (the historical context and the context of the structure of the Bible), with the exception of one moment that is worth describing and analyzing. It's a moment that does not, at first, seem particularly remarkable. Indeed, the point that Moshe is making – about the meaning of the word “Torah” – may seem rather obscure, or as Moshe says, “pedantic.” How should the word “Torah” be translated? He answers:

Torah ... should not be translated as “Law” but should be translated as “Instruction.” This might sound overly pedantic, but I think this is actually quite important. Obviously, the Torah is not all law; look at the book of Genesis! ... That by itself should indicate that Torah is not Law. Understanding Torah as Law by and large is a Protestant notion which Jews should not adopt. And Instruction, which has Law as a subset within it, is probably a better and more accurate understanding of Torah, because narratives ... can instruct in the same way as laws can instruct. So, Torah – the broader term “instruction” is probably the appropriate term.

As above, when Moshe called attention to the claim about Israel as a latecomer nation, so too here he calls attention to his point, signaling that it not merely pedantic. But why is it so important?

When viewed through the lens of the analysis of Moshe's teaching within the Contextual Orientation, what's important about this point is its normativity, the way in which Moshe is advancing a particular norm of behavior. He is not just presenting a sound scholarly or logical argument about a point of translation, although his point about the Genesis narratives is straightforward and compelling. More than that, he is *advocating* for the usage of the translation of the word Torah as “instruction,” at least by Jews, and against the translation “law.” Of course, any scholarly argument strives to be compelling, and in that sense, advocates for its own thesis. But in this passage, the normativity passes over from the merely intellectual (the way in which the argument hopes to be convincing) to the moral or religious. “Jews *should not* adopt [this notion],” he declares. It's not just that it's true; or it's not enough that it's true. There's something here that is central to Judaism, and central to the way that Jews read and relate to this text.

Why should Jews conceive of Torah as instruction rather than law? It may be the implicit Christian conception of Judaism as a religion of law as opposed to Christianity, which is a religion of love; Moshe could be saying that Jews ought not to internalize this canard. But while he clearly does have in mind something about the Protestantism of the translation of Torah as law, it seems that his actual point is a deeper one, and a more positive one: namely, that Jews ought to relate to the Bible as book of instruction in a broader and more subtle sense than merely a set of laws to be followed. “Narratives ... can instruct in the same way as laws can instruct.” Moshe is saying here that this

is a text from which one can learn. More specifically, this is a text from which he and his students can learn. And furthermore, in some sense, they ought to learn from it, or at least, that they *ought* to know that we can learn from it. Moshe seems to be making a case that the Torah not only was a book of Instruction but indeed can still be so.

This is only a fleeting moment in the class, and thus my analysis is open to the charge of over-interpretation, of taking it too seriously. But I proceed in the conviction that it doesn't take much for a teacher to set a tone in a class, to establish norms, to communicate values. The norm in this case has to do with an attitude towards the Bible that seems to contradict the conventional wisdom about the Contextual Orientation. The conventional wisdom holds that the Contextual Orientation is committed not merely to objectivity but to cynicism about personal meaning – but here we see an attitude of reverence, a shortening of critical distance, an erosion of cool objectivity. Biblical texts, according to this subtle norm, are texts with which the students ought to engage from a stance of humility and commitment – not necessarily texts to which they should be subservient, not necessarily texts for which they ought to feel responsible *in toto*, but nevertheless texts from which the students ought to learn. The establishment of this norm surely *preserves the possibility of personal meaning*, another of Moshe's pedagogical objectives, and it occurs right in this moment – subtly, not aggressively or judgmentally, but perhaps for that reason all the more effectively.

Finally, Moshe turns to what he has called the “context of interpretation”. Here he discusses the traditional idea of Bible as “privileged literature,” that is, as literature that is exempt from standard interpretive techniques. The particular examples that he chooses represent contradictions in the Biblical text that are harmonized by rabbinic interpretation – because the rabbis, of course, could not abide the idea that the text might include a diversity of voices or ideas. Thus, this section represents again Moshe's commitment to the pedagogical objective of fostering an *appreciation of the diversity of the text*. The rabbis, Moshe explains, who are committed to Bible as privileged literature, are compelled to abandon plain-sense readings. Now, what exactly constitutes the *p'sbat* or “plain sense” in any particular case is surely a complicated issue, and the very notion of a kind of artificial or unnatural privileging of a text is itself worthy of careful analysis. But these questions would take us too far afield. Instead, it is simply worth noting that the examples that Moshe chooses to illustrate the internal diversity within the text are examples that those with some background in source criticism might expect – for example, contradictory versions of the Decalogue and of slave laws. Only when we compare B4A with Bible 101 do we realize that these examples are only one approach to the achievement of the pedagogical objective of fostering an appreciation of the internal diversity of the text, because in the university setting, Moshe chose instead to focus on the diversity of perspectives on “relevant” issues such as the nature of God.

The discussion of contradictions within the text came about as an explanation of the idea, basic to traditional interpretation, of the Bible as privileged literature. So Moshe's next step is to indicate what happened to that idea. In order to do so, he turns to Spinoza as a representative of the modern critical approach to the Biblical text. Why Spinoza rather than, say, Wellhausen? In part, this may simply be because Moshe is not trying to explain the Documentary Hypothesis in particular, here, but rather the more general approach of interpreting the Bible as one would interpret any text (that

is, of de-privileging the text). But perhaps, too, Moshe is calling on Spinoza as a fellow Jew – not the most successful Jew, perhaps, but a Jew nonetheless, and one whom these adult Jewish learners ought to embrace. The fact that Moshe makes a point of calling Spinoza by his Hebrew name (“Baruch”) suggests that something like this is at work.

The key line that Moshe cites from Spinoza is the following: “I hold that the method of interpreting scripture is no different than the method of interpreting nature.” Moshe does not focus on what “interpreting nature” meant within Spinoza’s philosophical system; neither will I. Instead, I should merely note that the comparison of the study of Bible to the study of natural phenomena recalls a rhetorical move that Moshe made in Bible 101, when he compared his approach to “any class that deals with History or any class that deals with History of Religion.” In at least some senses, the study of Bible within the Contextual Orientation is no different than the academic study of anything else.

And yet, when I noted this rhetorical move in my discussion of Bible 101 above, I also noted that Moshe immediately swings towards the opposite pole, namely, the way in which studying the Bible actually is different from other subjects. He signals this by his *use of personal voice*, in his rejection of the idea that he is somehow being “anti-religious.” Here, too, Moshe moves immediately from rejecting the idea that the study of Bible is in any way different than other subjects, to a dramatic *use of personal voice* that attenuates that very point.

We do not use outside sources for understanding nature. We use nature itself. What Spinoza is insisting on, almost for the first time, is that for interpreting the Bible, we don’t use outside sources... The Bible is sufficient for helping us understand the Bible. No one else is going to tell us what something means. If someone says to us that “forever” means “until the jubilee year,” you say to them, “That’s ridiculous!” and “Why would you say that?”

Note the use of the first-person-plural in every sentence of this passage! Moshe then concludes this discussion with the following sentences:

And thus, Spinoza [insisted] that the Bible is not privileged language, an insistence that I am going to carry though ... in this class, where authoritative interpretations from others will not hold weight. We will use, as Spinoza would say, scripture for interpreting scripture.

In fact, these sentences – apparently a kind of synopsis of the Contextual Orientation – conclude his introduction as a whole.

Now, strictly speaking, Moshe’s claim that he and his students will only use “scripture for interpreting scripture” is not true. In fact, Moshe used extra-Biblical material to elucidate the meaning of Biblical passages himself, in this very class! Furthermore, despite the language of “we” and “us,” Moshe knows that his students do not have the capacity to do this on their own. The idea that “the Bible is sufficient for helping us understand the Bible” is all well and good, but of course it requires a deep background in the Bible to even imagine doing so. Instead, these sentences serve a different purpose; rather than the apparent argument about a kind of self-interpreting text, there are other arguments under the surface.

What are these other arguments? First, of course, there is the argument about the internal diversity of the text, recalling Moshe's pedagogic objective of *fostering appreciation of that diversity*. The specific target against which Spinoza is being wielded here, the specific "outside sources" that Moshe wants to rule out, are those sources – typically midrashic sources – that harmonize disparate texts, as in his example of the meaning of the word "forever." Against those sources, Moshe wants his students to recognize that a plain-sense reading of the text cannot avoid the reality of diverse voices. The second argument, under the surface in this passage, is in the very concept of "privileged language" which is being rejected here. The opposite of privileged language is language that is de-privileged, language that is mundane, language that is merely human. But human language is or ought to be open to criticism by other humans. In other words, the second argument serves (or, by this point, reinforces) the pedagogical objective of *establishing critical distance from the text*.

But the third implicit argument in this concluding passage returns us to Moshe's emphasis on the first-person plural. Earlier I noted his use of personal voice. But by using the plural, he is not only introducing his own persona into the discussion but the personae of his students as well. It doesn't matter, in the end, whether Moshe uses extra-Biblical material or not. It doesn't matter, in the end, whether the students can really get by without outside sources or not. What matters is that Moshe is sending a message about autonomy, about self-reliance, about independence. He's communicating a message about the journey that they are about to undertake. In case any of them are worried about this class, in case they are feeling insecure, in case they have doubts about the wisdom of doing something that they might think is religiously questionable, Moshe is reassuring them, encouraging them, telling them, in effect, "We can do this, together!" We can access this text. We can use our minds to interpret this text. Indeed, we can make *meaning* of this text – not the same meaning that traditional interpreters have made, but meaning, perhaps even *personal meaning*, nonetheless.

G. CONCLUSION: DIFFERENCES WITHIN COMMONALITIES

The preceding close analyses corroborate the claim about seven features common to Moshe's teaching in both settings. These seven features are not haphazard actions or ideas that I happened to notice, but rather features that are specifically related to the study of Bible – not exclusive to this subject but not random either. In other words, they are features of subject- (and indeed orientation-) specific pedagogy, and the analysis has been enriched by close attention to the subject and orientational context. But along the way, it has also become apparent that there are some subtle differences within the commonalities. We would not have seen either the commonalities or the differences without the comparison between the two settings. Only through the comparison do we begin to achieve a richer understanding of the possibilities inherent in the teaching of Bible within the Contextual Orientation.

What are these differences? Consider, first, the three features of Moshe's teaching that I called "pedagogic values."

A. *Awareness of the problematic nature of the subject:*

In Bible 101, Moshe expresses this awareness when he acknowledges that some

students might believe that his approach to the text is “anti-religious,” before proceeding to deny that it is so. In B4A, this awareness is expressed more subtly, in his acknowledgement that his central claim, about Israel as a latecomer nation, is “odd,” but nonetheless true. To be sure, Moshe’s reference to Spinoza employs Spinoza’s status as an excommunicated heretic, but Moshe does not feel the need to explicitly deny a destructive purpose. Perhaps the setting of adult Jewish education – a setting in which he is teaching members of his own community on his own time – makes that clear.

B. *Promotion of the centrality of the text:*

In Bible 101, Moshe turns to Biblical texts very early in the class, asking the students to consider them as evidence for the diversity of voices within the text on “profound” issues. In B4A, on the other hand, he does not actually ask the students to study any Biblical texts. Instead, this value is expressed through his use of other, non-Biblical texts from the ancient Near East.

C. *Use of personal voice:*

Moshe’s use of personal voice emerged most dramatically in his signature line, “I teach the Bible, I did not write the Bible, I am not responsible for all the thoughts that the Bible contains.” As discussed above in my analysis of Bible 101, he uses this line in order to present himself as a role model for a kind of critical commitment to the Bible. In addition, in B4A we saw a different example of his use of personal voice, in which he in effect encourages the students to join him on his path by using the first-person plural.

Next, consider the four features of Moshe’s teaching that I described as his “pedagogical objectives.”

1. *Fostering appreciation of the internal diversity of the text*

In Bible 101, this objective was addressed almost immediately, and explicitly. In B4A, on the other hand, this objective was addressed only towards the end of the introductory session, and only via the notion of a “privileged text.” Moreover, in Bible 101, the examples used to demonstrate internal diversity were the “profound” or “relevant” issues of God, death, and gender. In B4A, on the other hand, Moshe used the more typical (because historically significant) examples of the two versions of the Decalogue and the contradictory slave laws.

2. *Subverting preconceptions about the text*

In both classes, it was clear that this objective is centrally important to Moshe’s teaching, but the specific preconceptions in question were different. In Bible 101, Moshe subverted the preconception, first and only implicitly, of the Bible’s irrelevance; second, of the Bible’s unity; and third, moving from the nature of the Bible to its contents, of the Bible’s conception of God. In B4A, on the other hand, Moshe subverted the preconception that the Bible’s presentation of the history of

ancient Israel is trustworthy – not on specific historiographical events but more globally, in terms of Israel’s significance on the ancient political and cultural stage. He also explicitly and quite pointedly subverted the preconception of the uniqueness of ancient Israel (“If any of you thought... sorry!”).

3. *Establishing critical distance from the text*

In Bible 101, Moshe’s signature line (“I teach the Bible, I did not write the Bible...”) encourages the students to consider the possibility that they might disavow some elements in the Bible, for example some moral positions, thus establishing critical distance from the text. The key idea here is responsibility: students need not feel responsible for the text, at least not in its entirety. In B4A, Moshe accomplishes this pedagogical objective by calling attention to a claim that, though odd, is true: that Israel is a latecomer nation. He thus calls into question the self-representation of the text, opening the door towards reading the text with an awareness of its political agendas.

4. *Preserving the possibility of personal meaning*

In Bible 101, Moshe addresses this objective at the very outset, by organizing his presentation around profound, relevant questions, the very questions on which students might hope to find personal guidance. Later on, he introduces his distinction between “what the Bible meant” and “what the Bible means”; while the former is the proper subject of the course, his acknowledgement of the latter carves out space for a different kind of pursuit of personal meaning. In B4A, the moments in which Moshe addresses this objective are subtler. I claimed that he does so at the very end, in his implicit invitation to his students to join him on the journey that, while untraditional, might still be meaningful. But more dramatically, I noted the moment in his teaching when he advises the students to translate, and to treat, Torah as a book of “instruction.”

What accounts for these differences in each of the seven commonalities? What is the significance of the differences? I do not claim that all of these differences are important; surely some are not. Nor do I have a conclusive explanation for them. Surely the settings themselves account for some, as do the differences between the students. For example, perhaps Bible 101 students have to be convinced to stick with the class, instead of dropping it due to religious concerns, in a way that B4A students do not. Or perhaps Moshe is more comfortable using the first-person-plural with adults than he is with college students. As noted above in the methodological section, we might consider turning to Moshe for answers – but we have no way of knowing whether Moshe’s explanations are objectively correct or not. More importantly, the purpose of the present investigation is not to explore a particular teacher’s rationality, nor is it to explain away the variations by recourse to the variable. Rather, the purpose has been to develop a richer and more nuanced account of the Contextual Orientation, and of its pedagogical features. I have not identified the best way to teach Bible, but hopefully I have enriched our sense of the possibilities, even within one orientation.

A teacher may be committed to subverting the preconceptions of her students – but we now see a number of different possible preconceptions that she might want to think about, and there are surely more. A teacher might believe that it's imperative to establish some critical distance from the text – but we now see two different models for doing so, and there are surely more. Hopefully, this study can serve to set up further inquiries, for example about how teachers, who are committed to promoting the centrality of the text in their pedagogy, actually go to texts, or about the different modes of critical distance that teachers strive to establish and how they do so. The questions that we can now generate about the Contextual Orientation become visible precisely because of the comparative analysis offered here, and they suggests paths forward for the serious and careful study of the teaching of Bible.

I noted, in the introduction, that the title of this paper has two meanings: it is a study of the way one teacher introduces the study of the Bible within the Contextual Orientation in two different settings, and at the same time it serves to introduce the Contextual Orientation itself. Some may believe that the Contextual Orientation needs no introduction. As a result of this study, I am convinced that we hardly know each other.

This paper is one of a series of working papers on the teaching of Jewish studies, available for free download from the website of the Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies, a project of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University.

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