

**TEACHING CONTEXT(S): INTRODUCING STUDENTS  
TO THE BIBLE IN TWO SETTINGS**

**AN INTERVIEW WITH MARC Z. BRETHER**

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Mandel Center  
for Studies in Jewish Education

MS 049  
P.O. Box 549110  
Waltham, MA 02454-9110  
[www.brandeis.edu/mandel](http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel)

# TEACHING CONTEXT(S): INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO THE BIBLE IN TWO SETTINGS

## An Interview with Marc Z. Brettler

### ABSTRACT

*This paper is an edited transcript of a conversation between Marc Z. Brettler (professor of Bible at Brandeis University) and members of the Mandel Center staff. The paper explores Brettler's understanding of the relationship between the "contextual orientation" to teaching Bible and his own pedagogy in two settings; his thoughts about the term "critical scholarship", students' quest for personal meaning, and the notion of teacher as role model; and his observations of the evolution of his pedagogy over more than two decades as a teacher of Bible, including the impact of his own (and others') investigation of his teaching practice.*

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**MC:** In his book *Textual Knowledge*<sup>1</sup>, Barry Holtz introduced the language of "orientations" into the literature on the teaching of Bible, and used the label "contextual orientation" to describe the approach to Bible of academics like yourself. Is that an appropriate label? What does the label "contextual orientation" signify to you?

**MZB:** "The contextual orientation" was not a phrase that I had ever heard until I read the Holtz book, and not even something I used widely until I heard Jon Levisohn use it in reference to my work<sup>2</sup>. Having said that, I think that the contextual orientation is an orientation that is—depending on whether we're talking about weak or strong models—either primarily or totally interested in the meaning of the Hebrew Bible in its original context. I'm not sure if I should say context or *contexts* in the plural; if I were writing, I would probably use "context(s)." I think that the term "contextual orientation" is a less value-judgmental—or a more transparent—way of translating what is typically called the historical-critical method into regular language. It is clear that there are at least three contexts that we need to talk about, and in which biblical scholars who consider themselves part of the historical-critical venture are engaged.

One of them is certainly the historical context of the original author(s); another is the context of a written unit in its later form, as it has been redacted. The first might relate to what is sometimes

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*Marc Z. Brettler is Dora Golding Professor of Biblical Studies and former chair of the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University, and an instructor in Hebrew College's Me'ah program.*

<sup>1</sup>Barry Holtz, *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and in Practice* (New York: JTS Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>Through this interview, reference is made by Brettler and the interviewers to the following paper: Jon A. Levisohn, "Introducing the Contextual Orientation to Bible: A Comparative Study." *Journal of Jewish Education* 74:1 (2008).

called form-critically the *Sitz im Leben*, and the second to the work of the famous biblical scholar Georg Fohrer. Fohrer had a very interesting life—late in life he converted to Judaism, lived in the Old City of Jerusalem, and was essentially disavowed by the German biblical establishment. He has an article in which he speaks of the *Sitz im Buch*, how something is situated in its book; that is certainly part of the historical-critical venture, and is often different than the original setting of a piece of biblical literature. Thirdly, one could talk about what it meant to the earliest readers of this material—or, less anachronistically, earliest *hearers* of this material.

Of course, this gets into all sorts of complicated issues having to do with where the meaning of a text can really be found. Is it in the author's intention? In the text? In the listener? Inevitably, the contextual orientation brings some of these issues to the fore.

**MC:** So where does what people classically call “historical context” fit into these categories? Are all three of them pieces of it, or is there yet a fourth category?

**MZB:** I think historical context, writ large, is part of all these, because historical context certainly influences the original author, the person who redacted what already existed into a final product, and the text's hearers.

At the same time, there are some people who really want to understand the meaning of the biblical work, or any work, *only* within its historical context, to overly determine its meaning as its original, historical meaning. I think historical context is typically important for understanding many works, but I don't know that it's equally important for understanding every work, including every part of the Hebrew Bible.

The book of Proverbs provides a good example; to understand much of that biblical book, historical context doesn't matter a whole lot. Understanding its literary dynamics (albeit in a historically sensitive way—the function of biblical parallelism, the role of repetition and so forth) is probably more important, and at least in the way in which most people would understand “historical context,” that kind of analysis would be distinct from it.

**MC:** It's good to be reminded that the contextual orientation isn't equally useful for every biblical text. But for narrative and legal literature (as opposed to wisdom literature like the book of Proverbs), it seems to be at the core of your teaching approach. Does the category as Holtz describes it work for you when you think about the specifics of your teaching?

**MZB:** I like the category, in large part because of how it contrasts with another term, “historical-critical”. I talk about this a little in my book, *How to Read the Jewish Bible*. I was very curious about the origin of the term “historical-critical”. I'm not quite sure where the term originated, but what is clear to me and to a significant number of biblical scholars that I have corresponded with is that, in its early uses, the term did not mean critical in the sense of “criticize”—which is, I think, the way that most people hear it. (And, returning for a moment to your previous question, it also did not mean

“historical” in the sense that history was everything, but rather to some extent contextualizing the text in history and using history as *an* explanation—not using it as the *only* explanation.)

Too many people hear the term historical-critical, or speak of Bible “critics”—a term which I really don’t like—and misunderstand, thinking that what other scholars and I are trying to do is “criticize” what the Bible says, or criticize various traditional ways that people understand the Bible.

I view the term “contextual” as a much more neutral, or even positive, term. As long as the contextual orientation can be understood to include a plurality of issues—historical influences, social patterns that existed at the time a text was written or redacted, certain rhetorical or (what other people call) literary patterns that were part of the context, to name a few—I am happy with the term to describe my teaching.

**MC:** What would you consider the main elements of the contextual orientation as you use it?

**MZB:** Let me mention here the most important two: understanding what the text is, and understanding its period of composition. The first involves the recognition that many biblical texts are composite, and contain various texts spliced or edited together, so my first job is to isolate, if possible (and it isn’t always!) more original units. The second element is to determine when each part was written, and to see how that historical background may help us understand the particular text under consideration. For example, most biblical scholars, based on certain textual clues, first divide the creation stories of Genesis into two separate compositions, with the first ending in the middle of Genesis 2:4. As a second step, they would ask when and where each story was written, and will use that background to elucidate particular details in that story.

**MC:** You spoke about many students’ and readers’ assumptions that “critical” connotes a negative approach to the text. To what extent do you see your teaching as subverting this or other pre-conceptions about the Bible; is that subversion also somehow key to the contextual orientation? How do you counteract or subvert pre-conceptions? Does it differ in the two main contexts in which you teach?

**MZB:** I think in general that good teaching always involves understanding where your students are coming from, and integrating that proactively into what you say and how you say it. In both of the main contexts in which I teach, the significant majority of students come with what I believe is a naïve attitude toward the Bible and its composition—and I need to reform them gently but very clearly, given the various resistances involved. They distrust the word “critical”, and it’s not particularly important to my approach, so I don’t use the word much at all.

**MC:** Levisohn in his paper identified one of the goals of your teaching as helping your students establish some “critical” distance from the text, which I think is similar to what you are referring when you talk about gently confronting your students’ naïve stance towards the Bible. With or without explicitly using the word, would you say that critical distance is a stance that you actively try to foster in your students?

**MZB:** Establishing a critical distance is crucial in both of my teaching contexts, but especially so in the university. I try to accomplish this by citing analogies from other literary texts, so that they will read the Bible as a “normal” text to some extent. Also, especially at the beginning of the semester, but also throughout, I bring analogous ancient Near Eastern texts, which they have no problem understanding in a contextual fashion, and that makes it easier for them to also understand the Bible contextually.

**MC:** So far, we’ve mainly focused on the term “contextual orientation” itself, on the extent to which it captures your general approach and what it is that you do specifically as a teacher. When you think about everything that you would put under the category of the contextual orientation, and then look at your own teaching, are there important pieces of what you do as a teacher, important aspects of your approach, that *aren’t* captured by that orientation?

**MZB:** I think there are. In both of my main teaching settings—at Brandeis University, and in Me’ah (which is a two-year, 100-hour adult education program begun in Boston; it incorporates a 25-hour Bible unit in its first year)—I have some interest in making my students aware of *parshanut*, traditional Jewish interpretation, which is clearly outside of the contextual orientation. I do that in part so that students can see that biblical interpretation did not fossilize, and to legitimate orientations other than the contextual orientation—and I do it pretty self-consciously.

If I refer to Holtz’s schema (which starts on page 92 of *Textual Knowledge*), and think about other orientations that I use, first I note that my understanding of the contextual orientation is different than how Holtz describes it—broader, and, I think, more positive. As I see it, to some extent Holtz has inadvertently set up the contextual orientation as a straw man, or as narrower than is ultimately useful, in delineating the various approaches to reading and teaching the Bible. For example, his second listed orientation is literary criticism, but I don’t believe that the contextual and literary criticism orientations are mutually exclusive.

I always try to bear in mind the work of John Barton, whose book *Reading the Old Testament*<sup>3</sup> very much influenced me at a very important time. There he talks about “reading as an ancient Israelite,” and is interested in developing an understanding of literary devices that an ancient Israelite would have picked up. Perhaps the literary criticism orientation in Holtz’s formulation means reading biblical literature only in its final form, without considering its component parts, because any reader of the Bible in its original contexts and with all its influences has to be able to read it with attention to its various components parts.

Edmund Leach famously calls what biblical scholars do “unscrambling the omelet”, but I don’t view biblical books as omelets. I view them, I guess, as eggs sunny-side-up, in which you can really see the yolk separate from the white, when you look at the egg as a whole. Literary criticism, contrary to what many people seem to say, can be used to read individual documents within the biblical text.

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<sup>3</sup>John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 1997).

You can do a literary analysis of P, or of J—or of the original poetry of Jeremiah, and see how different it is from the structure of the Deuteronomistic redactor who worked on Jeremiah. So, contrary to many biblical scholars, I really don't see contextual and literary-critical approaches as being mutually exclusive, but mutually useful, because I think about literary criticism differently than Holtz does.

Reader-response criticism is his third orientation, and since part of what does interest me is the way in which this material is heard—or, more accurately, was heard—that does play some role in my teaching. His fourth is *parshanut*, which I don't do systematically, but in both of my contexts, I feel it is important to introduce the students to it—though I think for very different reasons in each context.

**MC:** So it sounds like you're saying that—aside from, perhaps, *parshanut*—it's not the case that you use multiple orientations in your teaching, but rather that you understand the contextual orientation as appropriately including many elements that Holtz classifies under other orientations. Does that mean that you think that there aren't really as many distinct orientations as Holtz lists, or simply that there is potentially a lot of overlap between the assumptions and tools of many of the orientations? I'd also be curious to hear what you do in your teaching when using literary-critical approaches to reading a biblical text, and how you think that approach relates conceptually and methodologically (that is, with respect to orientation) to a big-picture literary-critical analysis of the final biblical text that is likely to set aside questions of construction, internal contradictions, and the like. Is it just a matter of the scale of your analysis?

**MZB:** I do believe that there is more overlap than Holtz suggests. As for your second, larger question, I think that it is legitimate—and more important, useful—to use literary approaches on both the (more) original text and on the final text. I don't make a distinction between the methodologies I use in analyzing each, and in my own teaching I'm unlikely to set aside questions about the composition of the text regardless of the scope or stage of the text I'm looking at.

For example, it is equally possible to analyze the structure of the plague narrative in J, and the plague narrative in its final form. Conceptual distinctions do sometimes arise, not so much based on the level of literary analysis but on what we are looking at in the text's final received version—for example, was this in a form that the redactor worked hard to create, or was this more or less an accident? If it is the former, it belongs to more traditional literary study; if the latter, to a type of reader-response analysis.

Other orientations inevitably find their way into my teaching as well. The approach represented by Holtz's moralistic-didactic orientation is not something that I concentrate on, but some biblical texts are inherently moralistic and/or didactic. So, for example, if I were teaching Proverbs, not to teach the material with a moralistic-didactic orientation would be absurd. I don't think the primary question that one can or even should ask about Proverbs is, "Who wrote this when?", although there are certain aspects of social and historical context to which the contextual orientation can be helpful in drawing our attention.

**MC:** But that seems like something that is shaped not by the teacher's—in this case, your—orientation, but by the nature of the particular text, which demands a particular kind of reading in order to “get” what that text is about. Holtz explains the moralistic-didactic orientation as trying to see “the lesson being the [biblical] text”, which would apply to the entire biblical corpus, not just wisdom literature. Do you take this approach to the texts with which you also—and primarily—use the contextual orientation? Are those approaches ever in conflict?

**MZB:** I think that my emphasis on the material as Torah, as instruction, explicitly acknowledges some sort of moralistic-didactic approach to it, although it's certainly not my main orientation. I see overlaps more than conflicts between the contextual orientation and many of the other orientations. Also, as you noted, various approaches—and various combinations of approaches—fit different texts, and different teaching contexts. There is obviously a difference between a Me'ah class where it is “our” text also, and a university class, where it is not ours—there is no “us” there—but primarily an ancient text. And there is a difference between a five-minute Shabbat talk in a synagogue, and a class in any context.

I should add that there is one aspect of Holtz's map of orientations that has very little to do with what I do in my classes in either context, except when I'm being unusually playful—the personalization orientation. If you were to see my whole pedagogic approach as being a polemic against something, it would be a polemic against the personalization orientation, which I somewhat caustically characterize by a sentence that I've heard very often and always makes me a little nauseated: “Reading this makes me think...” And then the speaker goes on to refer to a poem, or something that happened to them the day before, or some recent happy or sad event. That is very much *not* what I encourage students to do in my classes.

**MC:** Nauseated is a pretty strong reaction to students' personal responses! And yet, in his paper, Levisohn makes a great deal of your goal—in both teaching contexts—of preserving the possibility of personal meaning-making.

I'm curious where that fits in—whether your perception of your own teaching is, for example, that you want to preserve that possibility but it's not what class is primarily for. What is the relationship between what you're trying to facilitate in class and students' personal meaning-making? Surely there is a difference between over-personalizing the biblical text in a trivial way at every moment, and engaging in personal meaning-making as one encounters, reads, and interprets the biblical text?

**MZB:** That's a reasonable question. I think the paragraph in which Holtz talks about the personalization orientation will address what you're saying. His last sentence says, “In all cases, the goal is to see the relationship between text and the life of today”—something to which I'm very open. I don't see—and I don't want my students to see—the Bible as an arcane text. The whole point of my book, and of a lot of my teaching, is to show that the contextual method is useful—or can be useful—for creating a relationship between the text and the life of today.

As a person who studies antiquity, and at least has a little knowledge of pre-biblical material, I see the Bible in its historical context as a rather trivial, hick, latecomer text (it came very late onto the scene of antiquity). If one periodizes Mesopotamia, the Bible came into being by and large in the neo-Babylonian period. If you periodize Egypt, Israel is starting when the New Kingdom is already under way. So in that sense, even though on the one hand, I understand that this is ancient material, it's recent ancient material—2000, 2500, maybe parts of it 3000 year old, which in terms of the human sweep is fundamentally recent.

They weren't walking around with iPods in that period, but they certainly did have some of the same fundamental human problems that we have. Probably Neolithic people had them too, but I doubt that Neolithic people were able to talk about them in the same profound ways that people were able to talk about them (and write about them!) in the Iron Age and beyond.

In that sense, to the extent to which lots of real life issues come up in the Bible, encountering those issues and the way they are depicted is relevant for our lives today. So it's the term "personalization", and what that title implies for me (rather than the orientation itself) that I react to so strongly—that is, to overly personal and *trivial* attempts at making a connection to the biblical text, not at all to engaging in questions of ultimate meaning.

**MC:** We got here because you started to go through the list of Holtz's orientations, to see which you incorporate into your teaching. Does examining the rest of the list elucidate aspects of your teaching that we haven't yet talked about?

**MZB:** Yes. With respect to the ideational orientation, again I think there's a problem with the way that Holtz gives titles to and defines these orientations. I don't think there's any particular conflict between the historical-critical approach and the notion of "big ideas". However, while Holtz is interested in enduring and relevant ideas, I'm (also) interested in un-enduring and problematic ideas from and in the ancient world. He focuses on how ideas from the Bible may be important for people today—which shows significant overlap with his understanding of personalization—but I'm not only interested in ideas that are important and useful to us in our own time. I'm very interested in change over time, which I guess is what makes me to some extent a historian of religion.

Years ago, I would have said that his "the Bible leads to action" orientation is highly problematic, but I'm much more open to the issue of teaching for social action—especially at Brandeis, which defines that as part of its mission. But that's a whole longer conversation... Finally, in a whole range of places, his "decoding translation and comprehension" is obviously key to what I do, and separating that from the contextual orientation does not make a whole lot of sense to me—another case where I see overlapping orientations.

**MC:** Perhaps we might understand the action orientation as a kind of "after-context", i.e. the social context in which the text is received. Could you say more about your openness to teaching for social action—in practice, how is that reflected in your teaching, and does it apply equally in the Brandeis and Me'ah contexts, or is it simply something for which you see the potential?



**MZB:** Let me give you an experience from about 10 years ago. I was teaching Jeremiah 25, which deals with the 70-year oracle that Babylon is going to be ascendant for 70 years. And a student asked the question, “Isn’t this oracle absolutely horrific, because it assumes that there’s nothing that people can do?” And if I remember correctly, the student went on and said, “Well, you know, this is somewhat like saying that the Nazis are going to be ascendant for 20 years, and that’s it.”

Having been brought up with a certain almost hypercontextual interpretation, in which any analogy between antiquity and the present was anathema, I was really taken aback by that analogy. I have no idea what I said to the student on that particular occasion, but—while I don’t think I’ve brought up the Nazi analogy per se—since then, when I’ve taught that chapter in my intro classes, I’ve explicitly talked about the danger that this conception of history can make people feel very powerless. So, being value judgmental about a particular text, which is certainly not part of the historical-critical or contextual method, is something that I think I’ve become much more comfortable doing.

Kugel, in his debate with Adele Berlin in *Prooftexts*<sup>4</sup>—those are really wonderful articles which should be read and re-read—deals with the question of whether or not the Bible is literature. He criticizes people studying the Bible as literature, because they don’t do what real scholars of literature people do, which is to criticize literature: to evaluate it; to talk about what’s good, and what’s bad. And in general, I will say that biblical scholars don’t like doing that—I think this is largely because, at some level, many biblical scholars have a religious bias in favor of the text, even though they obviously don’t have a traditionalist conception of it. So it’s ironic that many non-scholars have a misconception that biblical “criticism” means negative evaluation of it.

The “the Bible leads to action” orientation is part of being critical (in that sense) of the Bible, something I’ve especially learned from my students, as well as from Kugel. That’s part of normalizing the Bible and, I think, something that Bible professors need to be doing. For example, in teaching a text that suggests that “the other” should be killed, we as teachers have a responsibility to show that the text is problematic, lest a student take it as normative—or assume that we do.

**MC:** Teaching the biblical text with some political critique, though, and generally fostering a critical, non-religiously-biased relationship to it (rather than refraining from judgment of it) is really the converse of reading and teaching the text with an action orientation. The action orientation reflects a reading of the text that looks to it for *positive* guidance. Is that an orientation that you find you weave into your teaching, or does your action lens stop at cautions about what *not* to do?

**MZB:** I haven’t thought much about this, but I think that it’s more obvious which texts are “good,” and I highlight these by selecting them for more detailed teaching in class—texts such as Ezekiel 18, which emphasizes the importance of personal responsibility and the possibility of being rewarded for positive change. I don’t say, while teaching this text, “Isn’t it great?” or “Isn’t this better than the Decalogue’s’ intergenerational punishment?” but I’m pretty sure that comes through.

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<sup>4</sup>James Kugel, “On the Bible and Literary Criticism,” *Prooftexts 1* (1982), 217-36; Adele Berlin “On the Bible as Literature” (with response by James Kugel), *Prooftexts 2* (1982): 323-32.

**MC:** Let me tie this back to the question of meaning-making. It seems to me that we're hearing from you a couple of things about that whole question. One is that it's not so much that you're encouraging students to find *personal* meaning, but that you want each *individual* student to recognize that an encounter with the Bible is an encounter with possibilities for meaning—ancient meanings, some of which should be brought forward and some of which should be cordoned off, as you said, as unenduring and problematic ideas.

Another way of saying this is that your teaching is not so much about fostering personal meaning but about encouraging individual students to have a relationship to the question of meaning. Does that distinction work for you? The second, and corollary, thing that I am hearing is that, in inviting students to take on questions of meaning in relationship to the Bible, you want them to see and evaluate meanings that they may not and perhaps even should not take up, as well as to look at the biblical text for meanings that should have application to life today.

**MB:** Let me respond in biblical style and take up the second one first. Yes, one could imagine the Bible as being a treasure house of meanings, even within the contextual approach, or a treasure house of views on a wide variety of issues. And I think if there's anything that the contextual approach does, that's really what it highlights—that variety—because it does not emphasize the Bible as a unity, or the need to harmonize its component parts. (Conceivably, one could talk about “harmonization” as an orientation or part of an orientation.)

“Meaning” is a really hard word, and I will admit that it's not a word that I understand very well. I find it easier, for example, to read Hirsch<sup>5</sup> than Gadamer<sup>6</sup>, and to think about meaning as something separate from significance. I don't really understand the relationship between creating meaning and putting one's own personality together. I know that it's a rather important aspect of human development, but I don't understand quite how that happens.

Nevertheless, showing common models of meaning for them to evaluate and reflect on, whether those models are ones that they're going to take up or react against in various ways, is something that's very important for my students, especially my college students. The bottom line—and this is something that I think does not come out sufficiently in Levisohn's paper—is, you have to ask the question, “Why are people taking this course? Why do people find themselves in this particular classroom context?”

I was once discussing with a colleague, “What is the difference between the student who takes a course, in, say the geography of Australia and the person who takes a course on Intro to the Hebrew Bible?” And she said, “Well, there probably really isn't a difference, because the people who would be taking this course on the geography of Australia would be taking it for some particular reason, rather than taking some other course. And similarly, you need to think about the reason or potential reasons for why people are taking a course in Introduction to the Bible.”

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<sup>5</sup>E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

<sup>6</sup>H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1960/1989).

I think many of the students who are taking Intro to Bible are, in fact, interested in “meaning” in some way. Since the course is not a requirement, most of the people are in it to try to understand something about themselves in relation to a particular text and/or a particular tradition. And for me to ignore that, I think, would be foolhardy. But equally—and this has to do with the question that I often get asked about my book *How to Read the Jewish Bible*: “Why is the Afterword (which concerns personal theological issues) an Afterword, rather than a preface?”, something I had long discussions with my editors about—I think that the historical-critical method or the contextual orientation, as I practice it, allows a *variety* of ancient meanings to come out. People can connect to those meanings in a wide variety of ways, depending on who they are, and what religious tradition they are a part of, if any.

Some of what’s in the “Afterword” reflects what I do in my last Me’ah classes, and to a lesser extent my last Brandeis class. It’s an Afterword because I don’t want to frame the book—or the course—in terms of, “This is why I think this work is important, and here is how you should personalize it.” I really want to come across as saying: Yes, I believe this is a very profound text. I believe that this text has bearing on crucial issues for us as humans, broadly, and also has crucial meaning for those of us who choose to be religious individuals. But I don’t want to impose the way in which I do that on the various individuals who are taking the course.

So in that sense, I would argue that teaching Bible would not be very different than—let’s say—somebody taking an American studies course on the 1980s where the student is really trying to understand their parents in some way. I don’t want to claim that everything is the same, but I’m not sure that Bible should be super-privileged as being associated with “meaning making”. And I would be curious to look at various academic disciplines and sub-disciplines and seeing the extent to which orientations (either Holtz’s list or other types of orientations) would work for them as well.

**MC:** Up until now we’ve been talking mainly about those orientations, how you understand them, and how they are reflected in your work in the two contexts. But what about you as a teacher? Levisohn’s paper makes a big deal about the fact that you’re the same person in both of these contexts; you know the same things. Is there any way in which you are *not* the same person? Is there a way in which you think about yourself differently as a teacher in the two contexts, not just about who your students are?

**MZB:** Let me draw an analogy to another professional field: I watch football on TV. One of the things that sometimes gets pointed out by commentators is that there are people who might be, say, linebackers who are really, really tough and aggressive on the field but are really sweet people when you interview them. To talk about somebody as “the same person”, is, I think, problematic; we’re all complicated people. Different sides of our personality come out very differently in different contexts. I am much more Jewish when I teach Me’ah; that part of my personality comes out more there.

If someone were to just audiotape both classes and then ask students to listen to the tapes and then answer the question, “What religion is Marc Brettler?”, I would hope that listening to the Brandeis tapes, people would not know, because I really think that in terms of what I teach, I’m not privileg-

ing Jewish material or Jewish interpretation. Indeed, toward the end, when I talk about Song of Songs, we talk about *parshanut* on Song of Songs, we read some selections in English of the Targum (the medieval non-literal translation of the Song into Aramaic)—and we also read a section of the beautiful homilies of Bernard of Clairvaux.

Now, I don't give my Me'ah students any homilies of Bernard of Clairvaux. Instead, I try to connect the Bible in various ways to what they might know from contemporary Jewish life. For example, if I'm talking about the Decalogue, the so-called Ten Commandments, I might certainly say, "When you go to synagogue you will see...", but that is not something that I would say to my Brandeis students.

**MC:** Although presumably, the things that you've alluded to so far are related to the Jewishness of the *students* rather than *your* Jewishness. Presumably a knowledgeable Christian professor, assuming that Me'ah would hire such a person, could say, "When you go to synagogue..." But your words were, "I'm more Jewish." How are *you* different as a teacher, aside from the connections that you point out that may be meaningful to your (Jewish) students?

**MZB:** I think "I'm more Jewish" means that there are more Jewish allusions. It's not as if I wear *tzitzit* and I can say, in one context I have them in and in one context I have them out. I dress the same for both. It's mostly in relationship to my students. Truthfully, I can imagine a knowledgeable non-Jewish teacher making exactly the same sorts of allusions.

**MC:** An example that I've heard you use before is about Muhammad Ali with Joe Frazier, and before the Draft Board—biologically and physically of course, it's the same person, but his self-presentation in each context is different. Is there a Professor Brettler of the Bible that is bit different from Marc at Me'ah; are there ways in which you are not necessarily fundamentally, but at least a bit, different as a teacher?

**MZB:** Let's think about this in terms of Schwab's four educational commonplaces. The subject, the biblical text, is the same. But I'm different as a teacher because I am aware of both the students and the contexts in which I am interacting. You drew a distinction between what the students call me in each context. Certainly there is a difference between being called Professor Brettler or Dr. Brettler and being called Marc. The students in Me'ah are closer to my age; some are older than I am. There's a different relationship that I have with them that is less authoritarian, I think, than my relationship to my late-adolescent college students. I'm certainly different in some intangible ways, because I'm aware of the fact that I'm more with peers.

I once realized that in teaching adults in Me'ah, you use their life experience to help them understand the Bible; in teaching late adolescents you're often teaching them about life experiences *through* the Bible. It's exaggerating only a little bit to say that there are adult students whom I've taught who have had Job-like experiences and can certainly appreciate the book of Job more than I can on that level. (Unfortunately, that sometimes happens with college students too, albeit much less frequently.) That's something that really makes me different in the two contexts. There are also

real differences of homogeneity (in Me'ah) vs. heterogeneity of the particular group (at Brandeis) that also makes me teach differently.

A decade or so ago, I think it would have been even more different. Diane Tickton Schuster spoke to me after my presentation at the Network for Research in Jewish Education conference in 2005, and told me she could see that I had changed radically from a time when she had interviewed me about seven or eight years ago, when I claimed that university and Me'ah students are nearly identical, and that connection to the personal should be avoided for both groups.

**MC:** Let's talk some more about you have changed. As I recall, you started teaching Me'ah with essentially the same syllabus as you used for Intro to Hebrew Bible at Brandeis. And yet you're saying now that you think that the differences between the courses used to be *more* marked than they are now. I would love to hear your sense of the evolution of your teaching.

**MZB:** Let me start here: The class video that Levisohn viewed for his article about my teaching was of the first "real class" in Me'ah, but there's actually an introductory class before that, in which typically two things happen. We go around the room, and each of us talks a little about why we're there, and then there is a mini-*limmuḏ*, some text study connected to the fall Jewish holidays.

One of the first times I did that introductory class, I was blown away (and more than a little scared) by the extent to which people were willing to share aspects of their personal lives. I'm generally a rather private person, and I found it surprising. I was also surprised at the extent to which the word "spiritual" came up—to use the Buber-Rosenzweig term, a *Leitwort* among various people. I don't believe that I knew the term "seekers" yet, a word that I later learned from Art Green. But I understood that these folks were seekers.

Before that, I really didn't think of students of any sorts as seekers. You study the Bible because you want to study the Bible. I think I really would've defined it that naively and tautologically: you study the Bible because it's interesting and important. So I imported my Brandeis "the Bible is important; the Bible is there" curriculum into Me'ah, and then was really confronted by the "seeker-ness" of my various students, and over time I made some adjustments. Only later did I realize, "Oh my gosh! These late adolescents might be seeking as much as those adults"—or even more.

In that sense, I think changes first happened in the way in which I taught Me'ah—and then I realized that there is not such a clear line between what adults are working on and what late adolescents/young adults are working on, so there were some changes in my Brandeis class too. Now, the changes aren't totally the same, because—coming back to the difference between the two groups—while it's not true of all Me'ah students, the students there are generally seeking Jewishly. In the case of college students, there's a variety of ways in which they are seeking—across diverse religious traditions, and even in other ways that have little to do with religion per se.

**MC:** You are describing something that a relatively synchronic study of one person’s pedagogy can’t capture, which is not only development over time, but influences on you as a teacher *between* two contexts—how teaching in one context affects one, and then the other.

It occurs to me that another aspect of who you are—and what you represent—in a given teaching context has to do with the way that you, as a scholar of Bible passionately engaged with the biblical text, serve for students of Bible as a kind of role model.

**MZB:** I’m aware of the idea of teacher as role model, as it’s discussed about university professors in the literature. Frankly, it scares me. The whole classroom dynamic of the separation of the desk or a podium—and with college students, the age difference (especially for college students of Generation X, where I am literally their parents’ age)—sets this up, and I don’t want to mess up. I don’t want to find my name in the police blotter page of the paper where students are going to see it, or even something much less radical than that.

But speaking more directly to your question: Once I became involved in critical biblical study, as a high school student, even though this is something that he never used to talk about directly, Nahum Sarna was a role model for me. It was clear to us that he was an observant Jew who also had critical attitudes toward the Bible. In a different sense, Marvin Fox was a role model, too. I don’t know if you know the book that started out as a collection of essays in *Commentary—The Condition of Jewish Belief*. Fox is one of the few Orthodox people in it, and he talks about Maimonides’ non-traditional dictation model of revelation, if I remember correctly.

I even remember hearing that students were having dinner at Anthony’s Pier 4 and saw the Sarna and Fox families eating fish there! So, in that way, too—around the question of “how does a traditional person navigate modern life?”—I think that I was aware at a young age of the potential of teachers being a role model for students in all sorts of ways.

Back when I was at Yale, when there still was a Soviet Union, I once spoke to a student group about my visit with refuseniks there. It’s something that a group of us at Brandeis have talked about doing—organizing a panel—that I hope we will get together someday. I think it would be really interesting to put together a program called “My Brief Life as a Spy”. And now, I would see that broadly as part of what I’m doing as an educator, whereas I think when I did it at Yale, I really saw it as something very separate.

I do know that I am looked at as a role model, not only as a student and teacher of the Bible, but as a Jew. And while that makes me nervous, if students want to speak to me about almost anything out of class, including different aspects of Jewish life, the challenges of reconciling different aspects of contemporary Jewish life, I make it clear to students at Brandeis that I’m happy to do that. That is less part of what I do at Me’ah, because it is supposed to be the rabbis in the community who do that for their congregants. I do give them some room, but I’m frankly somewhat relieved not having

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<sup>7</sup>The editors of *Commentary, The Condition of Jewish Belief*, (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

to have many of those conversations with Me'ah students. Being a role model and helping students deal with these intense, personal meaning and religious issues is certainly something that we were never trained to do in graduate school—and it doesn't come easily to me.

**MC:** But it's inevitable, not only in terms of whether somebody sees you eating fish out, but more directly in terms of your teaching and scholarship, Here's a man who has committed his life quite literally to studying this text. It's then valuable in a secular sense, as much as anything can be valuable, because you—a professor—spend your time doing it. And implicitly, the possibility is being presented, "You too could do this. You too could take this text as seriously as I take it." In fact, there are a couple of places in Levisohn's paper where he argues, based on his correspondence with you, that you are aware of putting yourself into the teaching, holding yourself as a kind of a role model of the possibility of having a certain kind of relationship to the text, and/or to its scholarly context.

What are your thoughts about that? Do you think consciously about how you want to present students with options for how they might be, not necessarily as actors in the world and interpersonally, but how they might be as students of Bible?

**MZB:** Look, I hope that they will take the text as seriously as I take it. This goes back to one of the many unresolved questions in the research seminar on Teaching Bible at the Mandel Center in 2004-2005, but to my mind the most important one: "What makes something interesting?" I still find it hard to believe that no one has investigated this. Maybe someday on a sabbatical I'll find out more about it...

I am a role model for studying Bible in the sense that I believe (and act on my belief) that this is very, very interesting, potentially very important—and potentially very dangerous—material. If you want to view a professor's job, or part of a professor's job, as sympathetically converting students to have a shared set of beliefs, I do implicitly try to convince my students through my teaching that this is an interesting text, an important text, a dangerous text...maybe I will leave it just at those three.

I am not trying to create "mini-me"s, but I *am* trying to shape students to have those core beliefs about the Bible. How they use them might be very different than the manner in which I do—but again, they are not starting with a *tabula rasa*. They are coming to my class because they usually do believe in at least one of those three things—interesting, important or dangerous (usually one of the first two). I think that I'm successful as a teacher if I deepen both of those first two beliefs, *and* I also want them to understand the dangerous part; that's inevitably part of what I try to do. I also want to give them a better grounding in the biblical text and tools for interpreting it—Holtz's "decoding translation" and "comprehension orientation"—that will allow them to use this interesting, important and dangerous text in sophisticated and comprehensive ways.

I've never defined my teaching in that way before, but it rings very true as a crystallization of what I do try to model for, and engender in, my students.

**MC:** Before we conclude, I'd like to shift the focus to the process of having someone study your teaching. What was it like for you to read someone else's description and analysis of your own teaching? To what extent do you recognize yourself or don't recognize yourself in Levisohn's paper? Also, are there any specific things that he identified as meaningful that you think are not so meaningful, or things that he identified as accidental or circumstantial that you think *are* meaningful? And finally, how has reading Levisohn's paper contributed to your thinking about your strategies, your approaches, your pedagogic choices and actions?

**MZB:** First, I was flattered because I was being put under a microscope, which suggested that I was worth looking at carefully, and that a variety of things could be learned from observing my teaching. Actually, I think that virtually everything that Levisohn said rang true. I don't know that I necessarily would have categorized everything in the way that he did, but I'd never tried to categorize it before at all, and the way he did it made sense to me. He drew attention to how I both distance myself and the historical-critical method, *and* make myself and the method approachable, whether it's by jokes or using "we"; that is something of which I'm very conscious. I don't know that I was equally aware of everything else he observed, but there was nothing that he got wrong.

It's worth noting that, aside from Levisohn being perceptive, he also knows me. I think that it would be a very interesting project to show the tapes to somebody who doesn't know me, and doesn't know Bible or the ambivalences about critical Bible study and religious life—let's say, Deborah Ball (a professor of math education and dean of the School of Education at the University of Michigan), for example—and see how she would evaluate them.

This is the best way for me to talk about how reading the paper has contributed to my thinking about my own pedagogy: I'm on a committee called the Committee for the Support of Teaching at Brandeis, and we had a workshop with somebody from the theater department. It was one of the best workshops I've attended. She talked about acting and teaching, and various aspects of acting that are reflective of teaching. I've become quite reflective about my own teaching, and aware that sometimes I get really very nervous while I'm teaching because one can't both—or I can't both—teach and be super-reflective simultaneously, without going crazy.

So when this acting teacher came, I asked him about that. And he said that what happens with actors is that they practice, obviously, and the various "techniques" just become part of who they are. The same thing, I think, happens with teaching. As you teach and as you reflect on the teaching, it just becomes part of who you are and how you do things. Certainly that's true for me; I've been teaching for over 25 years, and there are a whole set of changes that have happened over time. I'm very relieved that I was not videotaped 25 years ago.

I think mostly what's happened through reading Levisohn's paper—and through this conversation, too—is that I have a better understanding of the methods I use in teaching from the contextual orientation, methods that are part of who I am as a teacher. I think I'm likely now to use the term "contextual orientation" more rather than "historical-critical method" (although I seem to recall that even years ago, in a pre-Powerpoint era, sometimes in my first class I would put the word "context"



on the board, written very large, as a “big word” that I would look at). I also found very helpful the earlier part of our conversation today about the non-exclusivity of the contextual orientation and about Holtz’s other orientations.

The last thing that Levisohn’s paper made me much more aware of is the dialectic between, on one hand, the contextual method *qua* contextual method in which your real interest is in antiquity (what I have at times called “being responsible to the Bible”), and on the other hand, my responsibility to my audience and the students that I’m speaking to, who are in that room for a particular reason or set of reasons that have little to do with the fact that the Bible is dead. These conversations around my teaching have made me more aware of how important it is to negotiate that dialectic in a meaningful way.

*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.*

*<http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/projects/bridginginitiative.html>*