The Bible Text in the Classroom: History of Religions
Three Religions/Cultures and the Joseph Story

by
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If I follow the pattern of my colleagues in this symposium I should speak about how I, as a history of religion professor, would present the Bible text in the classroom. I choose rather to tell how my Bible students from various religions taught me to look at the scriptures, and thus affected my teaching.

Three case studies from a trio of religious cultures form the outline of this study. How each religion/culture relates to the Old Testament story of Joseph is the subject of discussion.

Case 1--First and most obvious are my Walla Walla College students, most coming from our conservative Christian background. I find my students are primarily concerned about the history of Joseph. What they want to hear are historical facts about Joseph's life. What were customs like then? Who was the Pharoah when Joseph went down into Egypt? Who were the Midianites and where did they come from? When did all this take place? Braver ones may ask, "Did this story really happen? Is Joseph a real person?"

For them the knowledge of this history performs two major functions. It explains the story by fleshing out details and giving background, and also helps demonstrate (or not demonstrate) the factuality of the story. This factuality forms a basis for their belief in the Bible as sacred text.

My students are conservative Bible believers, but they are
not alone in asking the historical question. The same kind of questions are asked by all types of Christians and non-Christians in North America. Some Americans do not accept any of the Bible as historical and deny it as sacred text. Some accept it all in minute detail as historical. There are all kinds of shades and variations between these two extremes but all ask the same type of question—the historical one.

Western academically trained Bible scholars ponder the same question. They only ask it in more depth and with greater persistence. They query not only about the story itself but go on to investigate the history of the text which tells the story of Joseph, and factors giving rise to both text and story.

My students seek to apply the story in terms of personal ethics. Mention Joseph and the first thing that comes to mind is his encounter with Potiphar's wife. The Joseph story teaches chastity and other moral principles.

As a college Bible teacher then, I am expected to give new and more in depth historical background and show ways to apply the story to personal morality. That is how I move beyond the simple tale that they have heard many times since childhood. As a teacher I am expected to function as a conveyer of facts and teacher of personal morality.

Case 2—The Hmong are for the most part illiterate animistic spirit worshippers. Originating in China, they stretch across the mountainous areas in the north of that country on over into Laos and Thailand. They have a love-hate relationship with the Spirits whom they serve. These spirits are bringers of both good and evil who must be carefully dealt with. To hear the story of the Bible creates an immediate conflict
between the Old and the New—the one great God of the Bible versus the many spirits.

They cannot read, do library research, or truth evaluation on the basis of history. The conflict between the spirit way and the Bible way must be resolved by other means. The most common method is a power encounter between the two options. Can the God of the Bible really interpret dreams when spirit doctors can't? (Gen. 41) Can God heal when spirit doctors prove unable, and protect from spirit hexes and curses? If the answer is yes, the Bible claims are true and the story becomes authority.

This new scripture, however, is heard, not read. How does one grow in understanding if you can't read more books about it? First, by listening carefully. These illiterates have phenomenal memories. (Never confuse illiteracy with low intelligence.) Scripture is memorized, repeated and cherished.

Scripture is also turned very rapidly into song and drama. One understands it and learns new meanings as it is sung and acted out. I can still recall those Friday night Bible dramas. They didn't come out of the MV Kit. The muggy air, hoards of bugs and hard benches were all forgotten as actors were caught up in the story. They were Joseph. Like him they were a despised minority in their land. They had suffered and been abused but they now served the same God as Joseph. He had shown his reality in power encounter and thus Joseph's emancipation and final triumph was theirs. They were acting it out just now. It was real. The light on their faces showed it. In the encounter with the god's and powers of Egypt Joseph's God won. So would they.

The Joseph story could, of course, be applied in an ethical
sense as well. Personal ethics, however, were not the primary
application. The Joseph story is a saga of family ethics.
Joseph is a man loyal to family and clan in spite of how they
mistreat him. Even the story of Potiphar's wife is seen in that
light. Family consultation on choice of mate and loyalty to
household were undoubtedly in Joseph's mind. God blesses those
who are loyal to family!

In short, for the Hmong, scripture is tested by its power in
life now. If true it can be applied to present life experience
and proclaimed in word, song, and drama. The teacher is
primarily a person of power. He knows the story and can read and
tell it. He is also able to do battle with the demons and show
Christ's victory.

Case 3--The Chinese of Singapore exist in two worlds
at the same time--a highly competitive modern society where
business and technology are the main fields of endeavor, and a
traditional society where Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian ideals
and practices govern life. While the first society claims most
of their time and effort, a majority still venerate their
ancestors, make occasional temple visits, and are proud of their
"Chineseness."

Even in the college Bible classes I taught at Southeast Asia
Union College the majority of the students were non-Christian or
recent converts. I began by trying to show them the
"inspiration" of the bible. I talked about history, geography
and archaeology--things traditionally used in North American
society by many Christians to show the truth of the scripture.

These efforts proved fruitless. Students were bored in a
polite sort of way. I asked one of them the reason. He told me
that even non-Christian Chinese respected the bible. Any religious book revered as sacred for long ages is valuable. They accepted the Analects of Confucianism, the Tao Te Ching of Taoism, and various Buddhist writings as sacred. They were happy to give the Bible reverence along with the others. They didn't see the value or relevance of what I was teaching in class. They didn't care about "proving" any scripture by history. What they needed to know about the Bible was why it was valuable, applicable and authoritative.

Further dialogue revealed three major ways they tested the Bible. The first was system coherence. They wanted to see if the Bible made sense as a system of truth. To take one doctrine or idea and prove it separately didn't convince them. They wanted to see what the whole looked like.

The second test concerned the Bible's pragmatism. They wanted to know if what was taught benefitted everyday life. Traditionally Chinese religions have been this worldly—especially in the Confucian tradition. They have not dealt primarily with esoteric and dogmatic concerns but with ethics, government, society, and family. The Bible message must relate to these issues or it remains a respected but dead book.

In relating to the Joseph story the Chinese student would be impressed if he/she could see Joseph as a man who was successful in all areas of life. He rose to a high post in government, was rich, had successful relationships with both his own people and the Egyptians and succeeded as a family man. He is a worthy ideal. They would ask, does responding to the God of the Bible mean that similar things can happen in the lives of people today. If following the Bible does in fact produce people like Joseph it
has merit.

The third test is the teacher's life. Chinese religions, as well as Indian faiths, have a long tradition of the guru. The one who tells the story cannot be separated from the message. The teacher along with his message is carefully scrutinized. If the teacher does not model the message both are rejected.

I can remember in particular a young Singaporian who visited often in our home. He was quiet and the first few times he came I struggled valiantly to keep conversation going in good western tradition. There were often long silences. Sometimes frustration in me grew to the point I wanted to jump up and scream. I eventually learned that he didn't expect me to talk all the time. He didn't even need me to sit down with him. I could go about my work and just let him be there. One day I got up the nerve to inquire, in as gentle and subtle way as possible, the purpose of his visits. Smiling he said, "We Chinese do not accept people easily. We must see what they are truly like first. The only way I can do that is to come to your house and sit and observe for long periods of time."

I never had the courage to ask if his research was just for his own benefit or whether he represented a group of people!

In conclusion then for the Chinese, the Bible is authoritative if it is a coherent system, is applicable to everyday life in many areas, and the teacher in his/her life embodies the message. The teacher is primarily a model—personifying the total message in a practical way in life.

These case studies demonstrate the religious and cultural conditioning that affects the way scripture is perceived and approached. Our different religious and cultural situations
affect us in such basic ways that we often fail to think about or deal with them in the classroom. North Americans in particular should examine other views with humility. There is a general tendency to see our ways of coming to scripture, and in particular our historical questions, as a superior approach. I seriously question whether our western approach to the Bible has necessarily given us a better understanding of the Bible as scripture than have the approaches of the Hmong or Chinese.

The simple fact that to us the Bible is basically a read document blinds us in many ways. We are victims of what Hans Reudi-Weber calls the "Gutenberg captivity" of the Bible. (See his book Experiments in Bible Study, (Westminster, 1981, pp. 2-42.)

Our analytical left brain approach to scripture can lead us to other pitfalls. (See Walter Wink, Transforming Bible Study, (Abingdon, 1980).

In short, my encounter with other religions has taught me to doubt the breadth and comprehensiveness of the methodology that both my culture and graduate education have steeped me in. These doubts are the midwife, facilitating the birth of new ways to teach the eternal word to twentieth century Americans.