

# Biblical Studies at Judson University

## What We Do, Why We Do It

Many issues factor into a student's decision about which college to attend, and often students who attend evangelical Christian colleges and universities do so because they wish to study the Bible. Other students arrive at college skeptical of studying the Bible in an academic context for various reasons. Some think the Bible, as a collection of religious texts, is not an appropriate subject for college-level work because it is not worthy of such detailed study. Alternately, others think that because the Bible is accepted by Christians as Holy Scripture, it should not be subjected to any study that might raise questions about its meaning. Others think that they already know what the Bible means and do not wish to be exposed to other interpretations. Still other students are strongly in favor of Bible study in general but have been told by parents, friends, or even their ministers that studying the Bible in college courses could be harmful to one's faith.

Please know that every biblical studies professor at Judson University strongly confesses personal Christian faith, is a dedicated and active member of a local church, and is often invited by various churches to teach or preach. Most of us are ordained ministers and have seminary training. Each of us has devoted numerous years to our own educations in biblical studies through our undergraduate, master's, and doctoral studies. Because we all strongly affirm the Bible and Christian faith, we would never seek to say or do anything detrimental to a student's faith or desire to study the Bible. We feel passionately about the importance of the Bible as Christian Scripture, and we affirm that because of this—not to mention the Bible's impact on the arts, literature, music, history, etc.—no book is more deserving of serious, detailed study than the Bible itself.

We consider ourselves fortunate to be at a university where serious study of all disciplines, including biblical study, has long been considered totally compatible with Christian faith. In the formative years of Judson University (then Judson College), the college community affirmed the following (from the Statement of Rationale supporting the college purpose statement) concerning the relationship between faith and academic inquiry:

It is the conviction of the faculty, administration, and Board of Trustees that higher education at Judson College should involve a personal intellectual encounter with the Christian revelation. Viewed from this perspective, both knowledge and faith are dynamic, not static. This is consistent with our belief that it is not possible to have worthwhile education where there is uncritical devotion only to the accepted, the safe, and the sanctioned. Christian education is at its best when it involves consideration of both new and familiar truths. The Christian, above all, should hold unswerving allegiance to honesty and integrity in the pursuit of knowledge.

Even when students are excited about the opportunity to study the Bible in college courses, sometimes they and their professors have very different ideas about what should occur. Many students expect college courses in biblical studies to be like their Sunday school, confirmation, or catechism classes but with exams, papers, and grades tacked on. Others assume the emphasis is on teaching students how to have personal devotions, how to lead Bible studies, or how to prove the truth of Christianity to skeptics. Similarly, some students are solely interested in application of the Bible and questions like "What does this verse mean to me?"

Naturally professors agree that it is very important for Christians to study the Bible for guidance on what to believe and how to live, but we approach such questions differently. Whereas many students wish to read a passage from the Bible and immediately apply it to modern life, biblical studies professors argue that this cannot be done properly until one understands what the passage itself meant in the ancient world—to its author(s) and original readers, in light of ancient history and cultures, and in its original languages. In short, professors assert that it is essential to understand what a Bible passage *meant* in its ancient, original context before one can determine what modern situations are truly comparable and thus what the passage *means* today.

Some students find study of the ancient contexts of Scripture uncomfortable or even threatening. Some do not like, for example, when someone disagrees about the interpretation and applicability of a favorite Bible verse. Some students do not like to consider unfamiliar ideas about the authorship, editing, and formation of biblical books, as if the truth of the Bible depends on everyone believing that particular persons wrote particular books (regardless of whether the books include an authorship claim). Similarly, some students may feel uncomfortable with the idea that certain parts of the Bible were written in literary genres that are not intended to be interpreted literally or scientifically according to modern

categories. For still others, admission that we simply do not know everything about the formation of the Bible is equivalent to a denial of the truth and inspiration of the Bible.

In biblical studies courses at Judson University, we study the Bible seriously and ask serious questions as we do so. Who likely wrote a particular text? To whom? What was the reason the author wrote, and what did the author seek to convey? Where and when was the book written, and what was happening in the world of the author and the readers? What cultural information that would have been common knowledge to ancient readers must we also know to make sense of the text? How did later readers of this text find its meaning significant and adapt the book for further use in their own era? How does this text compare to other texts both in the Bible and in other ancient literature? Was this text reinterpreted by later Jews and Christians in other writings?

These can be difficult questions, and not everyone agrees on the answers. We do not ask for unanimity of opinion in our courses, but we do value asking such questions and the freedom to arrive at differing conclusions. While some may perceive such questions as hostile to the text, our approach and goal is the very opposite—we ask these questions because we respect the Bible and want to understand it better.

What might one expect in a biblical studies course at Judson University? In BST 101 and 102, our introductions to the Old and New Testaments, we provide overviews of the contents and theology of the texts within each testament and discuss broad methods of reading and interpreting the Bible. Time allows us to discuss only the most important passages of particular books in detail, and these are chosen by the professor as those passages which best represent the major themes or teachings of a biblical book. Not every biblical book may be discussed, but all the major types of biblical books will be addressed with instruction about how to approach that particular type of biblical literature.

Most 200-level BST courses cover a particular group of biblical texts that are studied together because, for example, they are on the same subject (like the Synoptic Gospels), are of the same literary genre (Poetic and Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament), or are credited to the same author (Pauline Epistles). In these courses we study specific texts in more detail than in the testament introduction courses, but we are not necessarily able to examine every passage in a verse-by-verse manner. Much attention is given to issues of theological message, genre, authorship and readership, historical and cultural settings, and the reasons these particular books are read together. Emphasis is on methods of interpretation specifically applicable to a certain group of biblical texts. A slightly different approach is offered in *Interpreting the Bible* (BST 221), in which students learn and demonstrate foundational interpretation methods that are useful for studying the various genres of biblical literature and reflect on the theological and philosophical reasons for doing these things.

Most 300-level courses in biblical studies are detailed, word-by-word examinations of particular biblical books like Genesis, Luke, 1 Corinthians, Hebrews, or the collection of short books commonly called the Minor Prophets. Close attention is given to the possible meanings and interpretations of specific passages, how they have been interpreted over the centuries, and how they best can be understood today. (Even in these courses, however, it is not always possible to cover every passage of a particular biblical book.) Our 100 and 200-level courses serve as preparation so that students can undertake these 300-level book studies. Other courses, such as those on Greek and Hebrew languages or on various aspects of the world of the Bible, also are taught with the goal of preparing students to undertake close study of the biblical texts.

Some may ask if our courses are relevant to modern life and Christian faith. We certainly think they are. For persons seeking to understand the Bible, what could be more relevant than training on how to read it in its original contexts and learning how various persons of faith over the years have understood it? It is true that one rarely will hear a biblical studies professor say, “Because this verse says *x*, you should do *y* in your personal life.” We see the purpose of our courses as laying the foundation necessary for answering such questions as we seek to prepare *you* to read the Bible for yourself, understand it, and determine how it is applicable in your life.

An old proverb says that one can give a man a fish and he will eat for a day, but if one teaches a man to fish he can eat forever. We invite students to become fishers-in-training with us in biblical studies courses at Judson University, and we encourage further discussion of what we do and why we do it.