Strengthening Research on the Pedagogy of Jewish Studies: Introduction to a Suite of Articles on Teaching Bible

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The three research papers included in this suite share a number of obvious features, as well as some others that may be less obvious. The most obvious common feature is that all three are studies of the teaching of Bible. And all three study the teaching of Bible within Jewish educational settings, at least in part. Cousens, Morrison, and Fendrick study a Reform adult Jewish educational program. Tanchel studies a pluralistic Jewish high school. My own article offers a comparison of teaching by one instructor in two different settings, an adult Jewish educational program and a nonsectarian university.

In addition, and also quite obviously, all three of the papers focus on a particular approach to the teaching and learning of Bible, an approach that is sometimes called “historical-critical” and that Barry Holtz has helpfully labeled the “contextual orientation” (Holtz, 2003, p. 92). This is the approach that is typically associated with the academic study of Bible, and because of its obvious tension with traditional beliefs about the origin and authority of the biblical text, is sometimes assumed to be antithetical to Jewish educational goals. Clearly, these three articles do not accept that assumption.

However, each individual paper makes a slightly different argument. Tanchel offers warrants for her own use of the contextual orientation in a Jewish high school, and recommends that others consider her arguments for their own settings. Cousens, Morrison, and Fendrick are more concerned with exploring the use of the contextual orientation in the teaching of young adults than in advocating its usage—although their overall positive impression of the setting that they study certainly undermines arguments against the use of the Contextual Orientation. And in my own case, I am interested in understanding more deeply what teaching Bible within the contextual orientation looks like—what moves an instructor makes, what his goals are, and what we can learn from paying close attention to his practice.

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So it would be wrong to understand these articles, as a whole, to be *advocating* for the use of the contextual orientation. It would be more accurate to say that the papers resist the quick and facile *rejection* of the contextual orientation on the basis of generalization and caricature. Cousens and Morrison, for example, argue that the contextual orientation serves the purpose of engaging with Jewishly alienated GenXers particularly well. Tanchel offers evidence that Jewish students of all sorts benefit from an early and robust exposure to the documentary hypothesis and the methods of source criticism. My article attempts to display some of the surprising complexity of teaching in the two settings. Hopefully these articles bring a level of nuance to the discussion, through an attention to real contexts of teaching, to subtleties of pedagogic presentation, and in the first two articles, to the actual (rather than hypothesized) experience of students.

Collectively, the three articles encourage a re-examination of the issue. But in addition to their *thematic* coherence, the three papers share certain *methodological* features as well.1 Each of these three articles represents a study of practice. Each is grounded, at least in part, by *records* of practice: student writing, teachers’ own reflections, and audio or video data. Each makes teaching public, inviting the reader into some piece of the complex and traditionally isolated activity of teaching. And each aspires, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, to a certain kind of *usability*. That is, the knowledge generated through this research is not merely knowledge for its own sake, but knowledge that can and (the authors claim) *ought* to be used by practitioners. This is not to say that the papers dictate definitive conclusions to practitioners, identifying “best practices” that educators ought to follow. The articles do not try to tell others how to teach. Instead, if the arguments are sound, if the images are vivid, if the insights are compelling, then these studies of practice will help practitioners *think* about their teaching, examining their own practice as well as that of others, with greater depth and sophistication.

More programmatically, each of the papers thus represents an example of subject-specific pedagogical research of the sort that Lee Shulman has been advocating for two decades. “My colleagues and I,” Shulman wrote in 1986, “refer to the absence of focus on subject matter among the various research paradigms for the study of teaching as the ‘missing paradigm’ problem” (Shulman, 1986, p. 6). The missing paradigm to which Shulman and his colleagues called attention was an approach that places subject matter at the heart of pedagogic inquiry, that recognizes the complexity of subject-specific pedagogic challenges, and that takes the question of teachers’ subject matter knowledge (and what they do with that knowledge) seriously.

1All three emerged from a seminar on Teaching Bible, as part of the Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies at the Mandel Center at Brandeis. The role and place of the contextual orientation was certainly one topic of discussion within that project, but only one among others.
Rejecting the bifurcation of teacher knowledge into general pedagogical knowledge, on the one hand, and content knowledge, on the other, Shulman believes that the most interesting questions about teaching—and the most important questions to pursue for the purposes of teacher education—are the questions about how teachers actually approach a particular subject-specific pedagogical challenge, and how they might.

It would be wrong to declare that the field of Jewish education has not pursued subject-specific pedagogical research at all; the field has certainly been influenced by the Shulman paradigm as presented by his own work and that of many students and colleagues, and one can point to individual articles and dissertations that fit this description. But it is no exaggeration to say that the paradigm, if not quite “missing,” is at an embryonic stage. There are painfully few research articles that build on one another to form a recognizable tradition of research on, for example, the teaching of Bible or of rabbinic literature. Those individuals that do engage in this work find themselves citing scholars such as Shulman, or Deborah Ball, or Eleanor Duckworth. By contrast, when Ball writes about mathematics teaching, she may cite Shulman, or Dewey or other important predecessors, but she will also be building on a burgeoning research literature that specifically focuses on the teaching of mathematics.

It is significant, then, that all three articles in the suite focus on the contextual orientation—but it is even more significant that they can be seen as participating in, and contributing to, a research tradition on the teaching of Bible. Collectively, they pick up an idea introduced by Holtz and move it forward, implicitly creating new opportunities for research by others who will study other contexts, raise new questions, and identify new challenges. Hence the title of this brief introduction: “Strengthening research on the pedagogy of Jewish studies.” Whether or not our readers have use for the contextual orientation, whether or not they agree with each of our conclusions, we hope that they appreciate the way in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts—the way in which the suite represents a multidimensional examination of a complex practice, and a basis on which other researchers can build. Earlier I said that the suite as a whole should not be understood as advocating the use of the contextual orientation. However, it should be understood as advocating sustained inquiry into the practices of teaching the core subjects of Jewish studies, and providing a set of models for what this might look like.

REFERENCES