Experience Has Ways of Boiling Over: Pursuing a Pragmatic Pedagogy of Bible

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Online Publication Date: 01 July 2009

To cite this Article Levisohn, Jon A.(2009)'Experience Has Ways of Boiling Over: Pursuing a Pragmatic Pedagogy of Bible',Journal of Jewish Education,75:3,310 — 324

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/15244110903092709

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15244110903092709

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Experience Has Ways of Boiling Over: Pursuing a Pragmatic Pedagogy of Bible

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This article builds on Greenstein’s (this issue) advocacy of a “pragmatic pedagogy of Bible” by pursuing four issues. First, do we select among methodological approaches to Bible according to our desired interpretive outcome but not according to any internal criteria? Is it merely a matter of “choice”? Second, in what sense are interpretive approaches usefully compared to equipment like x-rays or ultrasounds? Third, what does it mean for a methodology to generate a solution that “works”? Works for whom and for what? Fourth, what are the questions that educators ought to consider, in constructing a “pragmatic pedagogy”?

We come to the Hebrew Bible equipped with a set of assumptions and prior understandings.1 We open the book, if we do, because we have some interest in it, acquired from our families or communities or other individuals, or developed through prior experience with texts or with the world. Something has brought us to this moment: some question, some motivation, some desire. But what if this were not the case? What if we were to confront the text with no presuppositions whatsoever, no concerns, no interests?

Imagine, as a kind of virtual reality scenario, that a person is invited into a room that has the magical property of eliminating all of her assumptions and preconceptions, everything she knows and has learned from others or from her own experience (except, say, how to read). Inside the room, this person—this avatar—finds a chair, a table, and a Bible. She sits down and opens the book. She reads it cover to cover, quickly. What sense would she make of the text? Spinoza recommended just such an approach: a direct

1This idea, about the preconceptions (or “prejudices”) with which we inevitably approach the work of interpretation, is a central thesis in Gadamer (1960/1989). Much of what follows is influenced by this seminal text of philosophical hermeneutics.
encounter with the text, unmediated by all the things we’ve been taught by others, no different from the way that we directly observe nature.\(^2\)

But what if our avatar is not quite as talented (and, per hypothesis, not as well educated) as Spinoza? She cannot quite figure out what is going on in this text. There are stories, and laws, and poetry. The meaning of the text does not immediately present itself to her. What should she do? Let us modify the thought experiment: The room has a phone in it, which the avatar can use to call someone to help her out. Just by picking up the phone, she has access to any expert she wants. Where might she turn for guidance in trying to make sense of the text? Who holds the interpretive key to unlock the text for her? To whom would she grant the authority to do the work of interpretation on her behalf?

The thought experiment immediately runs aground. If she really has no prior assumptions or understandings, she would not know whom to call. If this is a text from a particular time in history, then historians of that period surely have something to teach her. But how would she know, if she really has no assumptions about it? And what kind of historians—intellectual historians, economic historians, social historians, archeologists? If this text is foundational for a particular tradition of interpretation, she might need to understand that tradition. But again, how would she know? And what if it is foundational for more than one tradition? If this is deemed to be a religious text, she might turn to those who we believe are particularly insightful about matters of the spirit. But what would make it a “religious text”? To be sure, God is a major character, but works of fiction employ God as a major character without being texts that one would call “religious.” If it is a literary text, she might turn to literary scholars. But why would she dare to call it a “literary text” in advance of receiving the results of the literary analysis that the scholarly authorities might provide?

We can proliferate the examples endlessly; these are only the most basic. Perhaps a scholar of comparative law might help her, or a military strategist, or someone who knows a bit about how to combine multiple sources into one document (a newspaper editor, perhaps), or a political theorist, or a poet. Without the assumptions and interests that we bring to the text, we have no criteria of selection.

As we consider the thought experiment, we might begin to wonder why anyone would employ rhetoric about the truth of the biblical text—a single privileged truth, whether religious or historical. It seems clear, does it not, that we all come to the text with one set of methodological assumptions or another, and that our conclusions about what the text means are conditioned

\(^2\)In *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670/1951, ch. 7), Spinoza argued that one ought to avoid extraneous influences (such as any interpretive traditions that one might have received) in order to confront the text directly—at which point one would see what he sees. Unfortunately, this is impossible, both in reading texts and in observing nature.
by those assumptions? This is not just a matter of what the text means “to us,” as if there were a protected realm of idiosyncratic personal–emotional meanings that exists in splendid isolation from the public realm of critical, truth-seeking scholarship. Indeed, this fundamental epistemological pluralism is precisely what Edward L. Greenstein (this issue) wants us to acknowledge in his call for a “pragmatic pedagogy of Bible.”

From his position as a participant–observer of the field of biblical scholarship over many years, Greenstein argues that we are long past the time when any particular methodological approach to the study of the Hebrew Bible might claim exclusive authority. As committed as particular scholars might be to their particular approaches to the text, there is no one correct meaning of the biblical text that is waiting for us, if we could only develop the right methodology. Instead, many or most scholars now acknowledge that “the results we produce are dependent upon the particular approaches that we choose to employ” (p. 291). He argues, further, that any particular interpretive strategy inevitably falls short of encompassing or accounting for all of the data, thus opening the door to rival interpretations. This is unavoidable; it is built into the process of interpretation. Given this situation, Greenstein continues, we ought first to determine what kind of meaning we are interested in discovering or promoting, in whatever educational context we find ourselves in, and then choose an approach that will generate a textual meaning that is appropriate to that context.

There is much to appreciate in Greenstein’s articulation of his position. He is surely correct that the interpretation of a subtle and complex text like the Bible is a fundamentally pluralistic enterprise, that it makes room for multiple (although not infinite) possibilities, that interpretations serve multiple purposes, and that their insight or coherence is always going to be assessed relative to those purposes and within the community of interpreters that shares those purposes. In place of doctrinaire debates over the proper methodology of studying the Bible, Greenstein proposes a relaxed flexibility—or indeed, in his hands, a rather virtuoso methodological multilingualism. He is surely correct, moreover, that teachers of the Bible will be well served by the kind of critical self-examination of method and premises that his argument may provoke. In this sense, the idea of a “pragmatic pedagogy” contributes to the effort undertaken by Holtz (2003) in his discussion of orientations to the teaching of Bible: By teasing apart alternative approaches, it serves to raise the question (for the educator) of which

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3Krister Stendahl tries this move, in his claim (Stendhal, 1984, ch. 1) to distinguish a realm of personal religious meaning (“what the Bible means”) from descriptive historical meaning (“what the Bible meant”). E. D. Hirsch (1967) famously attempts a variation of this, as well, in proposing that interpretation encompasses both meaning (i.e., what the author meant, which is fixed and determinate) and significance (i.e., the later accretions of association and impact, which is inevitably fluid). Neither can be maintained as epistemologically significant distinctions.
approaches one is committed to, and why, and how consistently, and towards what purposes.\footnote{There is a set of literature, diverse in methodology and genre, that is united by a common emphasis on raising methodological pluralism to the consciousness of educators, in the belief that awareness of methodological choices ought to contribute to the improvement of pedagogy. (We might call this the Hypothesis of the Practical Efficacy of the Awareness of Choice.) In addition to Holtz, this category includes contributions such as Cohen (1999), Hartman-Halbertal (2000), Rosenak (1995), Shkedi and Horenczyk (1995), and my discussion of orientations to the teaching of rabbinic literature (Levisohn, forthcoming). In general education, we might also cite Grossman (1991) and Wineburg and Wilson (1988/2001). The hypothesis itself deserves a patient, critical examination.}

However, in the spirit of furthering the development of a “pragmatic pedagogy,” there are a number of places in Greenstein’s argument that generate questions that are worth pursuing further. We will consider four. To begin, does Greenstein imply that the choice among methodological approaches is irrational or arational? Are methodological approaches themselves perhaps not subject to rational critique, because they are dependent on ideological commitment? Notice the way that Greenstein sometimes uses the language of free choice: “the results that we produce are dependent upon the particular approaches that we choose to employ” (p. 291) or “you can always choose a different purpose, and a different corresponding path, at another time” (p. 292). The picture here, or at least the implication, is that the selection of an approach to the text is a personal choice, a personal preference.\footnote{Al ta’am va-re’ah eyn le-bitwake’ah, as we sometimes say, or in other contexts, De gustibus non disputandum est. There’s no accounting for taste.}

There are solid moral reasons to adopt this position, because it tends to promote tolerance of diversity and avoid confrontation (intellectual or otherwise). But it is only accurate in a limited sense. We recognize a diversity of interpretations in the world, and a diversity of interpretive approaches, and we recognize that this diversity is not subject to rational homogenization. Even with abundant good will, we will not reason our way to a consensual position about how to read the texts. At the same time, however, we are not free to select interpretive approaches at will; rather, our interpretive approaches are embedded in a web of beliefs and convictions, any of which is potentially subject to change in the face of evidence and arguments. The effects of that change are unpredictable. The fact—a hypothesis, really—that the exercise of reason will never eliminate interpretational diversity does not entail the rather more ambitious claim that interpretational diversity is immune from rational critique.

Indeed, Greenstein’s discussion of the Tower of Babel is a nuanced example of the way that we actually do discuss and debate the relative merits of particular interpretive approaches. If our avatar is in the imagined virtual reality room reading Genesis 11, we might advise her to make just one call, to Greenstein, because he can help her through the thicket as well as anyone. But if she does so, we should recognize that Greenstein will
offer her not merely a set of choices, but rather a set of choices which have been evaluated against each other according to a sophisticated set of interpretive norms. If the avatar then selects one approach, that selection will proceed not merely in light of what her predetermined desired outcome is, nor will it be her “choice” in the sense of an option selected freely without rational constraint. Rather, that selection will proceed in light of the assessment that he has provided and the norms that he has employed. There is surely a diversity of norms—they are not universal, nor are they fixed and eternal—but they are norms of interpretation, not merely criteria of outcomes. We want our readings of texts to be meaningful (to whomever our perceived audience is), but we also want them to be good and accurate and responsible, and we are not willing to sacrifice those interpretive norms in order to generate a meaningful (but irresponsible) reading of the text.

The next question about a “pragmatic pedagogy”—actually a question related to the first—involves the idea of interpretive methodologies as tools to help us solve problems. To see the issue, consider Greenstein’s metaphor of the x-ray machine and the ultrasound. At first glance, these two devices are perfect analogies for interpretive methodologies: We have a body (a text) that we want to examine to discern what it is made of or what its internal structure is (its meaning), and we have two tools to use (two interpretive methodologies), each of which will show certain features but not others. Neither shows the whole truth of the body. No one feels the need to defend the x-ray as more accurate than the ultrasound, or vice versa; any competent physician should be able to use both of them. So far so good.

But the analogy needs a bit of refinement. As Greenstein notes, at the heart of American philosophical pragmatism is the idea that inquiry begins with a problem. So it is not quite helpful to imagine the physician sitting alone in her office, contemplating the relative merits of the x-ray machine to her left and the ultrasound to her right. Instead, we ought to imagine the physician with a patient sitting in front of her. The patient presents with, say, an obstructed bowel or a broken arm. In the former case, she uses the ultrasound. In the latter case, she takes an x-ray. Neither shows her everything about the patient, but each can confirm the specific diagnosis. Notice, too, that we talk about positive or negative results—a diagnosis confirmed or not confirmed—but we do not talk about whether the ultrasound or x-ray “worked.” The machines work perfectly well (unless they are broken), even if the results are negative. In other words, even if the physician now finds herself confused about the diagnosis, she has furthered her understanding of the situation. The tool has done what it is supposed to do.

When we turn to the interpretation of biblical texts, too, we have to think about what kind of problem or question is generating the inquiry, rather than simply weighing the available interpretive techniques. To simply talk about “angles of vision,” in the abstract, is not sufficient. To take an obvious example, perhaps I am troubled by an apparent inconsistency
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between the slave laws in Exodus 21 and Leviticus 25. Perhaps this problem appears, to me, as the kind of problem that is solved by midrashic harmonization. If so, I will turn to the midrash (e.g., Mekilta De-Rabbi Ishmael 3:17) to see what I can find. Alternatively, perhaps it is the kind of problem that appears, to me, to be ripe for a source-critical analysis. If so, I will turn to the source critics to see what I can find, or indeed employ source-critical methodology myself.

Either of these may be the right tool, like the x-ray for the broken arm or the ultrasound for the obstructed bowel. But it is surely the case that there are other tools which would not be appropriate, the equivalent of using the x-ray for the obstructed bowel or the ultrasound for the broken arm. And either of these approaches might yield negative results. In this example, of course the results of using the two approaches would be positive; they would each yield solutions to the problem. Hypothetically, however, I might try to use source criticism to explain a particular textual incongruity—but fail. The results of the experiment would be negative; the source critical analysis would fail to come up with a compelling explanation. X-rays do not always confirm diagnoses.5

So far, I have been pursuing two related points, two ways that I hope to further the conversation about a “pragmatic pedagogy.” I have argued that we ought to be cautious in framing interpretive pluralism as a choice among interpretive approaches, first because we do (and should) evaluate interpretations and interpretive methodologies against each other and second because the selection of interpretive approach is determined not only by convictions but also by the particular textual problem that we are trying to solve. The third issue to pursue is what we mean by “pragmatic.” Greenstein proposes that, for American pragmatism, the “proof of the pudding is in the eating” (p. 293). We need not worry about assessing methodologies in

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5The example requires a bit more precision. An x-ray is a diagnostic tool for testing an hypothesis about a symptom (either “the pain is caused by a broken arm” or more loosely “the pain is caused by something that will show up on an x-ray”). The negative result undermines the hypothesis (“this pain cannot be attributed to a broken arm”), even as it assumes the integrity of the diagnostic process (we assume that the x-ray works, otherwise why accept the negative results in this case). In such a case, we proceed by taking up some other diagnostic tool to disclose the cause of the problem. Similarly, we can understand source critical analysis as an analytical tool for testing a textual hypothesis about a fissure in the text (“this discrepancy is caused by the incomplete synthesis of two or more sources”). A negative result would undermine the hypothesis (“this discrepancy cannot be attributed to the incomplete synthesis of two or more sources”), even as it assumes the integrity of the analysis (we assume that source criticism “works,” that the analysis can affirm an attribution of a fissure to the presence of multiple sources in cases where there really are multiple sources, otherwise why accept the negative results in this case). In such a case, we presumably would proceed by taking up some other analytic tool to disclose the cause—or the meaning—of the textual discrepancy. Thus, in addition to emphasizing the point that an interpretive methodology ought to be able to yield negative results, it is also important to see that if that happens—if the results are negative and the textual problem remains unresolved—we then ought to turn elsewhere for help. We ought to turn to other interpretive methodologies, because to refrain from doing so would seem to entail a preference for methodological purity over genuine inquiry. One might say that we would be choosing to be technicians of the tool rather than diagnosticians of the patient.
advance; we ought to try them out and see what happens: “does the solution work or not?” (p. 293). I now want to examine that idea a little more closely.

The association of American pragmatism with “what works” is due to William James, who (it is sometimes said) defined truth in this way. However, it is worth paying close attention to what he actually wrote about truth. In one place, he wrote as follows:

‘The true,’ to put it briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking . . . Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole of course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won’t necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily. Experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas. (1907/1925, p. 106, italics in original)

I do not intend to focus on any potential distinction between “expedient” and “works.” It is important to note, however, that James’ point is a moderately technical one about the nature of truth, or more precisely, of “the true” (think of true statements or true beliefs). Statements or beliefs are like tools; they do certain things for us, and thus can be thought of as doing those things more or less effectively. This is not an insight about methodologies or interpretive techniques; James is not advocating, here, for methodological pluralism. Rather, he is making a claim about particular interpretations, particular statements or beliefs. True interpretations are not the interpretations that convey the one correct sense of the text or that represent the one correct theory of the universe or that recreate the intention of the author. Rather, they are statements that perform their function effectively, that do the job that we need them to do. True interpretations are those that work. Interpretations that work are true. That is what it means for a statement to be true.

Does this mean that a true interpretation is whatever “works for me” here and now, whatever scratches my particular itch, whatever solves the problem that I am currently having with the text or with my life? If I have a contagious virus, it may be expedient for me, at this moment, to be told that I am not contagious so that I can go to work or to school. If I am an alcoholic, it may be expedient for me, at this moment sitting in a bar nursing a drink, to believe that I am managing just fine, thank you. If I believe that the God of the Bible is invisible, it may be expedient for me to accept Onkelos’ interpretation of Exodus 24:10 (according to which the Israelite elders saw not God but the “glory” of God). But in at least two of these cases, we can predict trouble just ahead.

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6A few pages after the passage just quoted, James (1907/1975, p. 112) approvingly quotes F. C. S. Schiller as saying “the true is that which ‘works’,” before going on to criticize those who misinterpret him.

7See the discussion by “Moshe” of this text in Levisohn, 2008, p. 65.
And this, indeed, is precisely what James tells us, in his rather more nuanced suggestion that a true interpretation is one that works “in the long run and on the whole.”8 (To which he adds, “of course,” as if anyone would ever imagine that what works only for immediate purposes should even be worthy of consideration.) When we think about the process of textual interpretation, those adverbial clauses point to the way in which an interpretation may have a kind of local, temporary plausibility that slips through our fingers once we start to consider the full range of the data, or the implications of the interpretation, or the interpretive assumptions that underly it.9

We think we understand—but then we linger over the text and discover that, no, our initial interpretation doesn’t work. As Alexander Nehamas (1981) once wrote, “We often grant a particular reading plausibility by not looking enough at its details” (p. 143).

Indeed, this is the force of James’ final sentence in the block quote above, which provides the title of the present article: Experience, including interpretive experience, has a way of “boiling over.” We may think that all is well, the question is resolved, the interpretation works according to whatever criteria we are using—but then the pot begins to boil over. The metaphor assumes, of course, that we are still diligently watching the proverbial pot. We are all well practiced at averting our eyes, not lingering long enough, or indeed, paying attention to anything other than the problematic details. But sometimes, in our kitchens and in our lives, the slight bubbling becomes a messy torrent, and we can no longer ignore it. Greenstein’s cogent points about the data that are not encompassed by this or that interpretation of the Tower of Babel are exactly the boiling-over-of-experience that James has in mind. Interpretations that seemed at first quite compelling are weakened when we look at all the textual evidence.10

I have taken this detour into a central text of American pragmatism because there are moments in Greenstein’s argument when he sounds more relativistic than the picture that one gets from James. For example, Greenstein writes that “adopting a source-critical approach to the study of Torah, one will always succeed in finding more than one textual source...

8I owe this interpretive point to Hilary Putnam’s reading of James (Putnam, 1997, pp. 179–180).

9This is fundamental to any disciplined inquiry. In fact, we can think about disciplined inquiry as the effort to create and accelerate the conditions that obtain “in the long run and on the whole,” mechanically (in a lab) or conceptually.

10But if it is true that no interpretation can encompass all the data, that there will always be unaccounted-for aspects of the text, doesn’t this undermine the point? Why should it bother us that some data remains unencumbered by the interpretation, if indeed that is inevitable anyway? This is a complicated question that cuts to the heart of what it means to interpret a text, but for the present, perhaps it is sufficient to suggest the following. In some cases, outlying data, once acknowledged, are sufficient to undermine our confidence in the interpretation. In other cases, on the other hand, we take note that outlying data but are comfortable saying, “Well, yes, no text means only one thing, and only a hypothetical perfect text would have one and only one interpretation, but on balance, this interpretation of this text still works.”
there” (p. 293). But as I have already noted, just as the x-ray will sometimes come back negative, undermining the diagnosis of a fracture, so too a source-critical analysis sometimes ought to fail to yield a compelling explanation, disconfirming the hypothesis that the particular textual incongruity in question is attributable to the diversity of sources that contributed to the text. Experience (with the text) has a way of boiling over and making us correct our hypotheses.11

Another location where Greenstein sounds relativistic is in his discussion of Exodus 19 and 20 and the question of who was addressed by God and Moses at Sinai (pp. 293–294). According to Greenstein, a close reading leads one to the conclusion that, according to the text, only men were addressed. But if that reading is unacceptable to our egalitarian or inclusive sensibilities, Greenstein notes, midrashic alternatives are available. As a third possibility, he suggests a “relativistic cultural perspective” which explains away the nonegalitarianism of the text as a product of its particular historical and cultural context.12

11This is not to say that the failure of a source-critical analysis to explain a particular textual incongruity disproves source criticism in general. As others have noted, it is important to distinguish between the global Documentary Hypothesis—the general claim that the fissures in the biblical text are attributable to the diversity of its sources—and a particular explanatory hypothesis about a particular textual problem. And, as I argued above, the failure of a particular source critical analysis does not itself undermine source criticism as an analytical tool. On the other hand, the persistent failure of source critical analysis would indeed provoke a re-examination of the larger claim. If x-rays continually failed to reveal fractures in cases where all other indicators pointed in that diagnostic direction, we would eventually have to re-examine the diagnostic tool itself.

But is it, in fact, correct say that a source critical analysis will sometimes fail? The comparison with an x-ray suggests that this ought to be the case. However, Greenstein (personal correspondence, June 1, 2009) maintains that it never fails: “if you apply source critical analysis to a text of any significant size, you’re going to find more than one source or layer or tradition.” Nor is this only the case with source criticism, but rather applies equally to other interpretive methodologies (he mentions structuralist analysis and deconstruction). The tool to which we ought to compare methodologies, he argues, is not actually the x-ray but rather the scalpel. So, is an interpretive methodology like an x-ray, sometimes yielding negative results, or is it like a scalpel, always succeeding to cut what it encounters? It seems to me that there are four relevant points to make in response. First, even a scalpel encounters that which it cannot cut—metal or rock, for example—and fails in its task. Thus, changing the metaphor does not appreciably alter our understanding of the epistemic situation. Second, while I would never second-guess Greenstein’s assessment of the field of biblical interpretation as a matter of empirical reality, what really concerns us in this context is not the empirical question (whether source critics ever do admit failure to explain a particular fissure in the text) but the normative question (whether they ought to). Third, it may well be that our capacity for creative interpretation outstrips our sensitivity to interpretive obstacles. So while, in principle, our interpretive methodologies ought to function like x-rays, regularly yielding negative results, in practice, they function more like hardened diamond-tipped drills (?), rarely or perhaps even never failing to cut. But fourth, we ought to be wary of basing our assessments of an interpretation on too narrow a context. As James recommended, we want to know whether they work “in the long run.” So the right question is not, “Are you (the biblical scholar) going to find more than one source in a particular text?” Instead, the right question is, “Will the solution that you put forward persist over time?” Here one might think about the finer and finer grained distinctions that source critics continually generate. The ultimate judgment of whether those distinctions are good and correct solutions to textual problems is not based on whether the scholar believes they work, and not even whether the scholarship gets published in a peer-reviewed journal. The judgment, rather, is based on whether the solutions work “in the long run and on the whole.”
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cultural location ("since then, we have come to understand that God addresses women as well"). His claim is that one can consult one's ideological predilections and pursue whatever interpretive path one wishes; the text has little if anything to say about which path to pursue. "Our beliefs and understandings do not follow from our textual interpretations as much as they shape and produce them."

This is surely correct to some degree; as we saw in the initial thought experiment, we inevitably come to the text with interests and preconceptions. But the choice among the three options in reading Exodus 19 and 20 is not really a question of one's own predetermined egalitarianism or inclusivity. Consider again the midrashic reading of Exodus 19:3 (quoted in Rashi) that includes women in the community. That midrash is surely a reaction to the prima facie plain sense of the text in 19:5 and 20:13, not simply an alternative or a replacement. It is precisely because the apparent peshat is unavoidable—but also unacceptable—that the midrashic author felt the need to offer a corrective. So to accept the midrash (that women were included) is, paradoxically, simultaneously if perhaps implicitly, to acknowledge the apparent peshat (that women were excluded). Similarly, the historicizing option is not a negation of the peshat. It is not, strictly speaking, a different reading of the text. On the contrary, it accepts the peshat (that women were excluded), and then proceeds to ask, and answer, the theological question of how to make sense of a nonegalitarian covenantal moment.

Let us imagine our avatar encountering the text of Exodus 19 and 20. Will she have a problem with the plain sense of the text? Will she stop in her reading, pick up the phone and ask someone a question about whether women are included in the covenant? Recall that she has no preconceptions or assumptions about the text. If we expect her to pause, if we expect her to have a problem with what she encounters, we will first have to supply her with certain assumptions, among which two seem particularly significant. First, she must have the egalitarian assumption that women ought to be included in the covenant. And second, she must assume that the covenant in Exodus is theologically significant, that it is not merely a fairytale with no

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12My use of the qualifiers "prima facie" and "apparent" here is an attempt to avoid making an interpretive claim about which interpretation is really the plain sense of the text. This is particularly important in light of Greenstein's (personal correspondence, June 1, 2009) claim that Rashi genuinely believes that he is presenting the peshat of the verse, with which I have no reason to disagree.

13In response, a reader might say that one can "accept" the midrash not as interpretation but as historical truth: the midrash is telling us what actually happened, a truth that we would not know from the plain sense of the text. There are surely some—not Rashi himself, who selected among midrashim according to his own interpretive criteria, but some contemporary readers—who understand midrash in exactly this way. This is not the place to explore that ideological-religious stance and its problems (not least of which is the tendency for the midrash to present multiple competing interpretations, not all of which can be historically true), but in any case, I do not think that it helps Greenstein's argument. Consider that the operative preconception with which those readers approach the text of Exodus 19 and 20 is not "women must be included in the covenant, and therefore I will find the reading of the text that conforms to that imperative" but rather, more simply, "whatever the midrash says is true."
contemporary relevance. Without either of these assumptions, there is no interpretive work happening at all, because the plain text would pose no problem.

Once the avatar is ready to pick up the phone and ask her question, she can dial 1 for Rashi or dial 2 for an historian. It might appear, here, that Greenstein’s picture of the interpreter choosing an approach according to prior ideological commitments is accurate. If we provide the avatar with a traditionalist ideology, she will dial 1. If, on the other hand, we provide her with a modern historical-critical ideology, she will dial 2. But let us play out the scenarios. When she dials 1, Rashi tells her that the midrash reads women into the text, even though they are not there in the plain sense of the text. In other words, even though the Bible appears to get it wrong, theologically, the rabbis get it right (or perhaps, the rabbis help us to see how the Bible actually gets it right, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding). When she dials 2, the historian on the line tells her that the biblical author was a product of his time and place, and thus did not imagine women participating in the covenant, but that we know better. In other words, even though the Bible gets it wrong, theologically, we have got it right. Whether she dials 1 or 2, the problem is solved: women are included in the covenant. In fact, whether she dials 1 or 2, the solution to the problem is structurally the same.\textsuperscript{14}

Why is this significant? To be sure, we can imagine some interpreters who are more comfortable with midrashic discourse; dialing up Rashi is exactly what they need to resolve the problem with the apparent peshat. These interpreters may not be inclined to say things like “the Bible has it wrong” but they will seek out midrashic precedent for a solution to the textual problem. And once they find it, they will not worry overly much about the distance between the peshat and the derash, content in the knowledge that their question was both asked and answered by the tradition.

For interpreters with a historical–critical sensibility, on the other hand, their solution to the textual problem is not an alternative to the midrash but, in a sense, encompasses the midrash. This is similar to the way that the historian does not ask her question without first accepting the correctness of the plain sense reading. When the historian encounters the midrash, she does not see it as a rival reading of the text. She does not (or should not) say, “This midrash is an incorrect interpretation.” Instead, she says something like this: “The rabbis, in their time, were struggling with the same problem that I encountered. Their solution was to set aside the peshat, replacing it through the technique of midrashic inclusion, thus privileging

\textsuperscript{14}This is not to say that the interpretive strategies are identical. But as solutions to this particular problem, they both accomplish the same goal of including women in the covenant. One might say that the midrash historicizes the biblical text, in effect, by rereading it. One might also say that the “historicist” in this case offers a creative midrash on the biblical text, preserving key elements of it (the fact of an enduring covenant!) while rereading other elements of it.
their own inclusive assumptions rather than the exclusive assumptions of the biblical author. In effect, therefore, they serve as a precedent for the historicist approach that I myself take: The Bible adopts an erroneous ethical stance, but we are empowered with the theological license to amend that stance.7

If this analysis is correct, then the case of Exodus 19 and 20 may help us pursue the development of a “pragmatic pedagogy” in the following way. Greenstein wants us to see the way that the text itself can be putty in the hands of the ideologically informed interpreter, who selects an interpretation—any of the three—to accord with her ideology. The interpreter imposes an ideology upon the text, as it were. But as we play out the scenarios, the simplicity of that picture is eroded by the thick interpretive texture of the actual text. Once one asks the question of who is addressed in Exodus 19 and 20, the peshat is unavoidable. If one must then redeem the text, then the solution is likewise unavoidable: one must do so by accepting the peshat and simultaneously marginalizing it. The midrash accomplishes this is one way.15 The historical interpretation accomplishes it differently, but in a way that enables the historian to encompass the midrashic reading into her own. Rather than the willful imposition of ideology on the text, the actual process of interpretation looks much more like a dialogue between the interpreter and the text, in which the text sometimes asserts itself in complicated ways. The text speaks; experience has ways of boiling over.

Moreover, the boiling over not only occurs when a word or a detail does not fit with an attempted interpretation, as in Greenstein’s various interpretations of Genesis 11. It also occurs in deeper and more profound ways, when I discover, via an encounter with a text, that I have to rethink some belief, when I become aware of assumptions that now seem questionable, when I gain insight into my own values, when the text confronts me and challenges me in some way. We are not always open to such challenges, of course. We are all very well practiced at finding texts that say exactly what we want them to say, or even more to the point, at finding exactly what we want to believe in whatever text we happen to be encountering. But the possibility of challenge, the possibility of genuine confrontation, indeed the possibility of change is at the heart of the educational encounter with foundational texts.16

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15There is one way to avoid this solution: to accept the plain sense of the text but to affirm that plain sense as inerrant. In other words, one could notice the problem in the text and ask, “Are women not included in the covenant?” One would then answer, “Yes, that is correct: the text says that women are not included in the covenant, and the text is inerrant, so women are not included in the covenant.” When faced with an unavoidable tension between one core assumption (that women are participants in the covenant, which as we recall is necessary to generate the original question) and a second core assumption (that the plain sense of the text is inerrant), the second one trumps the first. Setting aside the coherence of this position or lack thereof, it hardly needs to be said that, in general, this is not the way that rabbinic Judaism reads its texts.

16See the discussion of being “pulled up short” by the text—a phrase from Gadamer (1960/1989)—and the implications for potential individual development in Kerdeman (2003).
However, if Greenstein is correct about the way in which we choose an approach in order to suit our needs, what becomes of this potential for confrontation? Greenstein recommends that I “choose an approach that will yield the kind of meaning that will produce the response . . . I am seeking to produce in the students” (p. 294). But if I am so busy figuring out how to set things up for my students, then how will they or I ever notice the pot boiling over? If I can always choose an approach that works for me, as I am now, with my current beliefs, or that works for them, as they are now, with their current beliefs, then what happens to the possibility that the text will actually change them or me?

The preceding discussion has focused on the pragmatic nature of the interpretive process, and insofar as teachers and students are interpreters of texts, it clearly relates to education. But before concluding, we ought to pursue a fourth issue; we ought to see if we can be more precise about the pedagogical aspect of a “pragmatic pedagogy.” For Greenstein, there are two important connections. First, already mentioned, is the connection to orientations: if we can generate awareness of the multiplicity of interpretive approaches, or orientations, we will then “be in the enviable position of being able to select the approach that we will take when reading a given text” (p. 292). The second connection to education is the question of the teacher’s selection of an interpretive approach to a particular text. “When we teach,” he writes, “we need to consider whether and how the approaches that we take and the meanings that we make will serve the personal interests of our students. What meaning or meanings will interest, arouse, provoke, excite?” (p. 294). So the first pedagogic aspect of “pragmatic pedagogy” is that awareness will enable us to choose an interpretive approach, and the second pedagogic aspect is that we have a set of criteria to help us to do.

For Greenstein, then, we start from the assumption that we are teaching the Tower of Babel, and we then have to explore the interpretive options. And when we do so, he advocates against a pedagogy in which the students are invisible or irrelevant, a pedagogy driven by (what one takes to be) the true interpretation of the text. Instead, we ought to select our interpretation and our interpretive approach with close attention to the needs and desires of our students. That is how we should arrive at the meaning that we should teach.

But a “pragmatic pedagogy” should be more expansive in its understanding of pedagogy. To illustrate this point, let us return to our avatar in the virtual reality room. But now, let us populate the room with students as well. What does the avatar need to know in order to proceed in her interactions with these students? What she has on the desk is a book, not a curriculum. Before we even get to the question of what interpretive approach to adopt to a particular text like the Tower of Babel, she might ask whether she ought to teach this text to this particular audience. What is it, about these students and their pasts and their futures, that might suggest that the Tower of Babel is an important text to teach right here and now? And this question
immediately calls forth another, not about interpretive frameworks but about pedagogic frameworks. If she is going to teach this particular text, is it in the context of teaching the Book of Genesis, sequentially, beginning to end, as a unified book? Or in the context of teaching the mythic prepatriarchal Genesis narratives? Or in the context of teaching parashat ha-shavua, the weekly Torah portion? Or in the context of teaching the Top Ten Tales of the Old Testament? Or perhaps, even in the context of teaching a set of intriguing and complex texts that have both historical-contextual and symbolic interpretations? Any of these might be legitimate pedagogical frameworks for teaching the Genesis 11, depending on setting and ideology. Without answers to these questions, the avatar cannot proceed to the question of which interpretive approach to take.

Nor is the question of which text to teach, and within what kind of pedagogic framework, the only substantive pedagogic questions that she faces. What does she want students to do in this class? What are the learning activities that are appropriate to this subject? What are the qualities of interaction with the biblical text that she wants to foster, and how might she foster those qualities? Does she have—or, could she construct—a conception of what it means to become a responsible interpreter of Bible, into which practice she is trying over time to introduce these students, a conception that encompasses a set of capacities and dispositions, a conception that informs her decision to teach the text in Hebrew or in English, verse by verse or chapter by chapter, sequentially or thematically, a conception that structures what she says to the students and what questions she asks of them? What is she trying to accomplish, when she embarks on this apparently straightforward but actually quite mysterious endeavor that we call “teaching Bible”?

We might find the prospect of supplying the avatar with answers to all these questions rather daunting. In fact, we might well find it unwise, knowing as we do the way in which overly programmed teaching can be stultifyingly rigid. Nothing eviscerates the drama and spontaneity of a sphere of human inquiry—the sense of creative exploration or genuine engagement with pressing intellectual challenges or moral dilemmas—quite like turning it into a curriculum. So we surely do not simply want to dictate answers to these questions that teachers ought to abide. And yet, actual teachers have assumptions, typically unarticulated and unexamined, about all of these.

Greenstein’s verbs in the quote above—“interest, arouse, provoke, excite”—are intriguing and evocative in their attention to the student, but insufficient. The avoidance of a doctrinaire this-is-the-one-correct-meaning-of-the-text pedagogy is all to the good. But we ought to be cautious about replacing it with a pedagogy of here-is-one-of-several-possible-correct-meanings, or even a pedagogy of here-is-the-best-meaning-for-this-particular-occasion. Our teaching of the Bible must be more than presenting meanings, no matter how judiciously we select those meanings and how attuned we are to students’ interests. Instead, our pedagogic choices ought to flow from and be justified.
by a well-developed sense of our conception of this subject and our objectives in teaching it.17

REFERENCES


17This article is based on ideas originally presented as a response to a paper by Edward L. Greenstein, delivered at the conference on Teaching Bible: Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy at Brandeis University, January 30, 2005. A version of that response was made available on-line by the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University.