

Literature Review: Orientations to Teaching Bible

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Introduction

Introductory statement

The study of Jewish texts, particularly the Bible, is often central to the curriculum in formal Jewish educational settings for both children and adults. Over the past decade, research and literature about the teaching of Bible in Jewish settings has included the exploration of “Orientations”. The classification of orientations is based upon the nature of the approach to the text. In the literature, specific orientations are defined and discussed, theories about the importance and usefulness of orientations in Bible education are presented, and case studies by teachers who have chosen specific orientations for their classrooms are reported and analyzed.

Study topic statement

Holtz (2003) delineates nine orientations in his book *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice*. Scholars and practitioners followed his lead, and articles about the teaching of Bible in Jewish settings that have been written in the past ten years often refer to the concept of orientations and to Holtz’s work. This review will look at theory and critique of the orientations approach as expressed by Holtz (2003), Greenstein (2009), Cook and Kent (2012), Levisohn (2008), and Galili-Schachter (2011), as well as the purposeful choice and application of specific orientations by three classroom teachers.

Context statement

Educators and researchers want to know what “works” in the classroom. Which methodologies improve student learning? How should we train teachers to be effective practitioners? Exploring the ways in which teachers’ understandings of the orientations to teaching Bible influence instructional practice can inform and focus the development and

facilitation of pre-service and in-service teacher training with the aim of producing positive results in student engagement and achievement.

Significance statement

Bible teachers want their students to find Jewish texts engaging and meaningful. Not all of these teachers have the time or inclination to keep up with current theories and studies of Bible education. The professional development facilitator may be in a position to help bridge the gap between scholars and practitioners of Bible education. The personal significance to the author of this review is to find guidance for the work I do in training and supporting Jewish elementary day school Torah teachers.

Problem statement

This paper looks at orientations for teaching Bible in light of the question: How might an understanding of Bible orientations help expand a teacher's perspective and improve the quality of teaching and learning in his or her classroom?

Organization statement

This study reviews some of the literature about the theory of orientations in Bible education. It will also look at first hand reports of teachers who analyzed the process and the results of choosing an orientation for a specific purpose and group of students. Topics for further research will be suggested.

Review of the Literature

Discovery argument.

Holtz considers some of the unique challenges to teaching Bible--an ancient, sacred text--to modern Jewish children living in North America. He asks:

What does it mean to teach a communal tradition in a culture that lauds individualism: What does it mean to teach a tradition with explicit demands on behavior in a culture that resents anyone telling anyone else what to do? What does it mean to teach a tradition with specific religious and theological content in a culture that values a kind of free-floating spirituality? . . . Teaching Jewish texts means swimming against a powerful and long-standing current. (Holtz, 2003, p.28)

In attempting to answer these questions relating to the milieu of American Jewish students, Holtz considers the role of the teacher in transmitting the tradition in a way that is relevant, authentic, and potentially transforming for the student. The teacher's larger vision of the means and purpose of education are often expressed by the instructional practices used in the classroom. The teacher's knowledge of the subject matter together with his or her instructional practice is known as *pedagogic content knowledge*.

Holtz (2003) builds upon the work of Pamela Grossman, who studies the pedagogic content knowledge of beginning English teachers, and uses the term *orientations* to signify the teachers' "basic organizing framework for knowledge about literature" (as cited in Holtz, 2003, p. 47). A text-based approach, a context-based approach, and a reader-response-based approach are the three main orientations to a literary text in Grossman's construct. Holtz questions how an understanding of orientations might help to improve education. He concludes that "an individual teacher's orientation will deeply influence much of what takes place in his or her planning and execution of lessons" (2003, p. 50). These differences can be seen in the choice of literature, in the goals for instruction, and in the activities and assignments used in the teaching/learning process. Holtz believes that a clearer picture of the teaching taking place in a

school can be attained by a better understanding of the teachers' orientations. Teachers who are familiar with a range of orientations increase their pedagogic possibilities.

Holtz presents and discusses nine orientations for teaching Bible: The Contextual Orientation; The Literary Criticism Orientation; The Reader-Response Orientation; *Parshanut*, The Jewish Interpretive Orientation; Moralistic-Didactic Orientation; The Personalization Orientation; The Ideational Orientation; The Bible Leads to Action Orientation; and The Decoding, Translation, and Comprehension Orientation (p. 95). He posits that knowledge of orientations should help teachers and teacher educators further enrich and improve their work.

In his paper *A Pragmatic Pedagogy of Bible* (2009), Greenstein asks how one is to decide, from the multiplicity of orientations, which approach to take. He answers that one should select the orientation that is likely to help the students reach the desired result. If the teacher is not sure what will result, Greenstein advises: "See where the various approaches lead you, and then take your students down whichever roads lead to where you want to take them on any particular learning occasion. You can always choose a different purpose, and a different corresponding path, at another time" (2009, p. 292). Greenstein illustrates his point by showing how the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) can be approached by various orientations, each with its own main point for the student to grasp. Greenstein concludes that the center of our concern in text study should not be "the analytical techniques we employ in reading texts, but rather the meanings that give significance to our enterprise" (2009, p. 301). In the style of "backward design", Greenstein urges us to first consider the outcomes we hope to achieve, and then to choose the orientation that will be most likely to bring our students to those goals.

Levisohn (2009) expands upon Greenstein's analysis of text study as a "pluralistic enterprise" (p. 312) with multiple possibilities for interpretation and insight. Levisohn identifies

four issues in Greenstein's article that raise questions for him. He first considers whether the choice of an approach is "irrational or arational" (p. 313). Other words to describe this choice might be "illogical or not governed at all by logic". Rather than the choice of an approach to text being a personal preference, Levisohn believes that one's personal convictions and beliefs impel us towards our choices. Our choice can never be objective, and we are always comparing and evaluating the possible readings and interpretations of text.

Levisohn also questions Greenstein's concept of "pragmatic pedagogy" as a problem solving tool. The teacher is not looking for the one correct orientation that will produce the one correct answer, since every text and textual problem can be approached from multiple angles. Sometimes it is the nature of the text or problem that drives our choice of approach, even if the choice is not our personally preferred orientation.

The third issue that Levisohn looks at is the meaning of "pragmatic". Greenstein implies that we need to try out different solutions/methodologies and see what works. Sometimes an approach may bring the desired result, but at the same time, leave out other equally valid interpretations. Among the possibilities are texts and interpretations that confront us and challenge our beliefs. "If Greenstein is correct about the way in which we choose an approach in order to suit our needs," asks Levisohn, "what becomes of this potential for confrontation?" Indeed, to facilitate growth and change in ourselves and our students, we need to confront the challenges of difficult, contradictory, and troubling texts, in addition to texts that reinforce our existing beliefs and assumptions.

The final issue the Levisohn explores is the pedagogical aspect of "pragmatic pedagogy". Greenstein believes that awareness of the possible orientations will help us choose the appropriate interpretive approach, and that a set of criteria exists to help us make that choice.

Levisohn raises additional aspects of pedagogical choices, including the choice of text and the selection of learning activities. He concludes with a warning that we not replace the idea of one correct interpretation 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” (p. 323). Ultimately, our pedagogic content knowledge should inform and justify our choices.

Cook and Kent (2012) report on the trends they observe while visiting Bible classes from early childhood through high school. Two kinds of student activities predominate—personalization and language/translation. They critique that although teachers’ motivations for these kinds of activities are laudable, their sole use limits the students from experiencing and understanding the significance of Bible on a deeper level. They believe that a central goal of Torah learners should be to become engaged in the interpretation of texts. Going beyond the language and personalization orientations, they recommend that a third approach take priority: the interpretive exercise and the interpretive experience. In order to reach the highest goals of learning Torah there must be “an authentic interpretive experience” (p. 59) in which the student and the text make meaning by means of a partnership:

The text needs a human partner to notice it, wonder about it, grapple it, and appreciate it in order to convert fixed words into living ideas, expression into meaning. The human partner needs the text to invite the student, through its complexity, beauty, difficulties and sacredness, into new horizons of understanding and growth, intellectually, ethically as well as spiritually. (p. 59)

The approach that Cook and Kent advocate is most akin to Holtz’s Reader-Response Orientation which focuses on “the experience of the reader in encountering the text” (Holtz, 2003, p. 93).

The directions in which the students make meaning are left open. Interpretations may be varied, but must be text-based.

In *Pedagogic Hermeneutic Orientations in the Teaching of Jewish Texts*, Galili-Schachter (2011) also emphasizes the centrality of what she calls the “interpretative activity” in text study. Focusing more on the teachers than the students, she identifies five pedagogic hermeneutic orientations—part of the pedagogic content knowledge of text teachers—that she finds among the teachers of Jewish Thought in Israeli high schools. The differences in these orientations are shown by the teachers’ approaches toward three specific issues identified by Galili-Schachter: “reading and interpreting text; the role of teachers in the process of interpreting and teaching text; the place of students in the process of interpreting and learning a text” (p. 222). The five teacher orientations are:

1. Conveying objective knowledge
2. Leading an intellectual and spiritual quest
3. Creating Midrash to convey moral ideas
4. Facilitating dialogue between the students and the text
5. Creating radical interpretation to convey moral ideas

There are parallels and overlap between Galili-Schachter’s and Holtz’s delineations of orientations. Both researchers emphasize that there is not one orientation that is considered superior to the others. Galili-Schachter writes of the importance of helping teachers develop, articulate, and understand their preferred orientations as part of the education and professional development of text teachers. She also believes that open discussion among faculty might result in “the development of common concepts and criteria for thinking about good teaching” (p. 234).

Advocacy argument.

Holtz devotes the second part of his book to the practical issue of “How might knowledge of orientations help teachers?” (2003, p. 106). The self-studies of three teachers will be examined in light of Holtz’s suggestions for the application of his theory of orientations.

Three teachers write about their own experiences in choosing an orientation to use in teaching a specific group of students. The teachers reflect upon the process and results for the students and for themselves. Sigel (2009) taught four co-ed fifth grade classes at Orthodox schools in large metropolitan areas: one in New York, one in London, and two in Israel. Although she chooses to teach Midrash as her subject, which is part of the Jewish Interpretive Orientation, she mainly employs the Literary Criticism Orientation to understanding the Midrashic text. Morrison (Cousens, B., Morrison, & Fendrick, 2008) chooses the Contextual Orientation to teach a Bible study group of minimally and non-affiliated Jewish young adults in their twenties and thirties in the Boston area. Tanchel chooses source criticism, a subset of the Contextual Orientation, to teach the Documentary Hypothesis to 12th grade students at a pluralistic Jewish high school.

Choosing an orientation helps each teacher to “clarify goals and pedagogy” (Holtz, 2003, p. 106). Sigel seeks to “design and evaluate a strategy for teaching Midrash explicitly” (Sigel, 2009, p. 47) to elementary school students. She defines the problem that causes her to design a new strategy: Jewish school children are customarily first exposed to Midrash by means of Rashi’s commentary, which includes insights from classical Midrash texts. However, she finds that these midrashic texts are taught superficially in many settings. They are often taught in a literal way despite their complexity. A teacher typically reads the Midrash with the class as an answer to an issue or problem in the text, without further “unpacking” and discussion. Sigel

identifies two potential negative effects of this traditional methodology. One effect is confusion in the minds of students between biblical and midrashic texts. A result of the two texts being taught together is that children cannot differentiate the boundaries. The second potential negative effect is that a student who questions the literal meaning of Midrash may be reluctant to question or challenge the teacher. The child may dismiss Bible as irrelevant and Midrash as implausible, leading to a crisis of faith. Sigel does not use the word “orientation” at all in her article, but refers repeatedly to her “literary strategy” of helping students understand the “interpretive strategy” of the rabbinic authors. She chooses her pedagogy of a literary approach in order to attain her goals of developing the students’ ability to differentiate *peshat* and *derash*, to articulate the literary devices employed by the rabbis, and to analyze the motivation behind the text. Since the students discussed the underlying messages and moral values of the Midrash, elements of the Moralistic-Didactic, Personalization, and Ideational Orientations are also present. This fulfills another of Holtz’s suggestions that knowledge of orientations might help teachers by supporting “a diversity of readings and interpretations of texts” (Holtz, 2003, p. 106).

Morrison’s challenge is to connect young adults to Jewish texts and Jewish life. He deliberately chooses the Contextual Orientation, which he predicts will result in a positive experience for students from a variety of Jewish backgrounds. In considering the reasons that this orientation to Bible study was effective with young adults, the authors reflect:

The contextual orientation and its focus on exposing the multiple layers and voices in the biblical text can connect young adults to Jewish study and Jewish life. Because this approach parallels approaches to literary texts with which this highly educated cohort is familiar, and because it fosters a religious stance that is not unpalatable in the context of their other social networks, the contextual orientation can

serve as a novel but, in the end, not wholly surprising method of drawing Jewish young adults into Jewish life and fostering Jewish Identity. (Cousens. B. et al., 2008, p. 25)

Morrison chooses to emphasize the Contextual Orientation based upon his own personal experience of the pivotal impact this kind of learning had upon him in rabbinical school. Similar to Sigel, Morrison includes elements of other orientations in his teaching. By including personalization; *parshanut*; reader-response; decoding, translation, and comprehension; and literary criticism, Morrison “exposes students to multiple types of Jewish texts as well as . . . multiple ways of approaching the Bible” (Cousens. B. et al., 2008, p. 8).

Tanchel (2008) has a specific goal in mind: to expose her students to a new way of understanding Torah. The students at her pluralistic high school study Torah with an emphasis on the Literary Criticism Orientation in grade nine, and the Jewish Interpretive Orientation in grades ten and eleven. Tanchel strongly believes that it is intellectually and developmentally appropriate, as well as beneficial to their theological and intellectual growth, for high school seniors to experience and understand the Contextual Orientation to Bible. This leads her to employ a different pedagogy than would be used in the grades nine to eleven Bible classes. Similar to Sigel’s challenge to the traditional teaching of Midrash, Tanchel believes that teachers who do not expose their students to increasingly sophisticated methods of understanding ancient sacred texts “run the risks of their students either interpreting texts literally or dismissing them as irrelevant, as simple stories that cannot withstand adult analysis” (2008, p. 47). She not only teaches “about” the method, but also requires students to analyze texts using source criticism. Tanchel emphasizes to her students that the approach she is teaching them is a hypothesis, rather than a definitive explanation. This allows her students to explore the hypothesis intellectually without contradicting the beliefs of those who understand the

transmission and development of Torah in a more traditional manner. In this way, like Morrison and Sigel, she also allows for a diversity of interpretations in reading the text.

All three teachers “locate their approaches to subject matter in reliable, scholarly sources”—another advantage mentioned by Holtz for teachers with knowledge of orientations. All three teachers also make use of the Personalization Orientation, encouraging their students to consider in what ways the text speaks to them as individuals. Tanchel, in particular, regularly requires her students to discuss and write about their personal beliefs concerning the sacredness, historicity, and authority of biblical texts.

Another way that knowledge of orientations might help teachers is in matching the texts they choose to teach with the specific orientation and pedagogy. Sigel chooses specific texts for each of the literary devices used in Midrash. Metaphor, parable, and exaggeration are each illustrated by a different Midrash. Morrison chooses selections from different parts of the Bible so that his students can compare texts and ideas. For instance, one student notes that the conception of God presented in Leviticus is not identical with the God of Genesis. Tanchel also chooses texts from different parts of the Bible so that the students can practice applying the Documentary Hypothesis to different kinds of texts, such as Genesis 1-2 (the two versions of the creation narrative) and Numbers 16 (the story of Korach’s rebellion, which can also be seen as the conflation of two stories from different strands of origin).

Holtz’s final point about the usefulness of orientations for teachers is that it may help them “develop ‘flexible subject-matter understanding’” (2003, p. 106). By this he means: “to respond to different kinds of questions and issues that learners may have”, “To make connections across topics and disciplines”, and “To make use of contributions of scholarship and their potential for education” (p. 106). Using scholarly and literary methodologies in their teaching, all

three teachers succeed in making connections across disciplines and in using the contributions of scholarship. Each teacher also documents his or her ability to respond to varying questions and issues of their learners: Tanchel is cognizant of the developmental needs of her students in terms of both intellect and faith. She provides a safe classroom environment in which students can discuss their personal struggles of faith and religious observance. Morrison understands that many of his students have never studied Jewish texts on an adult intellectual level, and that some have rejected the conceptions of Judaism that they learned as children. The contextual orientation allows students to develop their own new understandings of the Bible, and to “potentially construct their own Jewish identities—and establish what will be emphasized in their own Jewish lives—from within this set of ideas” (Cousens, B. et al., 2008, p. 12). Sigel knows that her students have a literal understanding of Midrash, and she brings them systematically to new and more sophisticated understandings.

Topics for further study.

Since a knowledge of orientations--what they are and how to use them—is potentially beneficial to teachers in choosing texts and methodologies, further research might examine the role of orientations in the professional development of Bible teachers. Research could examine the present state of knowledge of orientations among current Bible teachers, and in what ways increasing that knowledge might impact their instructional practices and curricular decisions.

Another potential area of research would be to compare *Orientations to Teaching Bible* and the *Tanakh Standards and Benchmarks Project*. The Standards and Benchmarks project has been training day school Bible teachers during the same decade that the awareness, literature, and practice of Orientations have developed. There are overlapping areas of theory and application, and some Standards are similar to specific Orientations. For example, Standard 1

states: “Students will become independent and literarily astute readers of the biblical text in Hebrew” (Neufeld, 2011, p. 25) which is similar, though not identical, to the Decoding, Translating, and Comprehension Orientation. The Jewish Interpretive Orientation is similar to Standard 2: “Students will be engaged in the learning of ancient, rabbinic, and modern modes of interpretation of the biblical text and will see themselves as a link in this ongoing chain of interpretation” (Neufeld, 2011, p. 25). Comparing teachers’ use of the Orientations approach and the Standards and Benchmarks approach in developing curriculum and in informing instructional practice are other areas ripe for investigation.

Summation

Thesis statement.

This paper has considered the ways in which an understanding of Bible orientations might help expand a teacher’s perspective and improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. We have explored several variations of the possible orientations for teaching Jewish texts, and considered how three different teachers selected and implemented specific orientations.

Thesis analysis.

Orientations to teaching biblical text have always existed, but it is helpful for educators to now have common vocabulary and terminology to discuss the process of Bible education. It is clear that there is not one orientation that is superior to the others, and that for a teacher to rely on only one or two orientations seriously limits the opportunities for students to grow intellectually and spiritually in relation to the text. Using a variety of approaches in any subject is desirable in order to reach students with different interests and styles of learning. More

possibilities for professional growth are open to teachers when they have more options from which to choose.

Study's implications.

A repeated theme among the researchers is the potential usefulness of understanding orientations in improving classroom instruction and student results

The three teachers who reported on their personal experiences are all scholar-practitioners; Sigel and Tanchel have doctoral degrees and Morrison was a doctoral candidate at the time he was teaching and writing the article. All three achieved results that might not have come to fruition had they not been cognizant of orientations. An implication of this study is the need for teacher professional development programs, both pre-service and in-service, to include the study of orientations and to provide opportunities for teachers to improve their practice by choosing among the rich variety of approaches to teaching Bible.

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