

Teaching the stories: When the Bible comes alive

by [Dale Salwak](#) in the [November 3, 2009](#) issue

Fresh out of graduate school, in my first faculty appointment as a professor of English, I was invited to teach an undergraduate course on “The Bible as Literature.” I’ve never stopped teaching it. For over three decades I have had the privilege of guiding students in the encounter of the biblical texts.

Although I teach many talented young men and women, most of them have never opened the Bible prior to enrolling in the class. Any familiarity (real or imagined) they have with its contents comes second-hand, from what they have heard, seen or been told. Most are unsure how to read the Bible on its own terms, and they come unprepared (or at first reluctant) to attend to the details of untangling a demanding text. Because so few are conversant in any deep way with basic biblical terminology and concepts—such as Torah, covenant, justification, sanctification, grace, the kingdom of God—or with the historical and cultural contexts of Judaism and Christianity, many of them presume that the Bible is only about recording the past or predicting the future.

A surprising number are only vaguely aware of the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. Many come into the course believing that Christianity is the religion of love and Judaism the religion of law, that the God of the Old Testament is the God of wrath while the God of the New Testament is the God of love, that Jewish obedience to law is cold, sterile, unmerciful and legalistic. (To address such exclusivist theology, we turn to Paul in Romans 9-11 where he declares that God’s promises to Israel are irrevocable and warns Jesus’ followers not to become haughty with their newfound spiritual possession; the root supports the branch, he reminds them, not the branch the root.)

For students who have been perpetually exposed to materialism, social divisiveness and cultural excesses, God’s commands, statutes and laws are not easy to accept, grounded as they are in self-restraint and obedience to rules. Still another obstacle

is the level of self-examination that such inquiry requires. The opportunity for self-reflection that reading the Bible offers is foreign to many students. In some of their homes the subject of God is rarely brought up, except perhaps in vain; many parents—and therefore their children—are seemingly content to live without broaching some of the weighty theological questions that the Bible addresses: Who is God? What is God's will for our lives? What are God's promises? What is the nature of good and evil? How can we live wisely?

If students have been raised in an environment not given to deep thinking, or if their daily diet of conversation is limited to empty chatter and a studious repetition of gossip, then they may feel uncomfortable with—perhaps threatened by—the most challenging questions, even to the point of trying to divert our discussions away from becoming too serious or deep or speculative.

What encourages students to engage the material despite its inherent difficulties? One thing is that the Bible tells powerful stories. In all of us there is a deep and instinctive need to spend a lot of time with stories—telling them, listening to them, reading them and watching them. In fact, storytelling, which feeds and exercises our capacity to imagine, is one of the most important features of our existence. We use narratives of events to describe and, perhaps more important, to try to interpret the meaning of almost everything that happens in our lives. Certainly Jesus understood this as he taught with parables so that his sympathetic listeners—his students—might discern the truth of who he is and why he came.

The stories that come alive in my classroom are ones that touch on ordinary human life—such as crises between parents and children (Abraham and Isaac or David and Absalom), between siblings (Jacob and Esau) or between husbands and wives (Abraham and Sarah or Elkanah and Peninah). Something in the students' experience connects with the themes of jealousy and reconciliation (Joseph and his brothers), ascent and subjugation (the Egyptian exile), hunger and migration (the Hebrews wandering in the desert), great love (Ruth and Naomi) and great hatred (Cain and Abel). Students are also delighted to discover that sometimes God chooses to work through the most unlikely of people. They are eager to find out how those whom we consider towering figures ever managed to become what they are—the opponents and situations they had to struggle against, and above all, the conflicts they had to resolve within themselves.

Students can identify with Jonah, the reluctant prophet who finally submits to God's will. Or Moses, who gives every reason he can think of why he can't possibly represent God in Egypt before he becomes the great deliverer and lawgiver. Or Paul, who, utterly transformed by the risen Christ's call, spreads the gospel despite the same terrible persecution he himself once inflicted on Christians. In these characters my students might even sense something of themselves as they see how the power of conviction in a single human life becomes one of the most compelling themes in the Bible.

Sometimes students are puzzled by the fact that the characters through whom God works are not always the most worthy, are perhaps even unsavory. David, at first "a man after God's own heart," falls away from his faith; a deeply flawed character, he lies and commits adultery and murder, but God works through him to set in motion a significant chapter in salvation history. David's son, Solomon, falls into idolatry after he disobediently marries foreign women, and yet he is the one selected to build God's own temple. Peter and Judas Iscariot betray Jesus in their respective ways, and yet each plays an essential role in the biblical story.

In other words, the Bible comes alive when people focus on the human predicament—the choices characters make and the way those choices play out. The stories illustrate all aspects of the human condition, about which the Bible has no illusions.