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Bible Study Strategies in the Humanities Curriculum

The humanities education programme encompasses the examination of biblical material as a repository of topoi, symbols, literary genres, and universal metaphors. An essential place on the humanities reading list is occupied by in-depth reflection on the Bible's multicultural and timeless influence on literature and art, and by the exploration of its ethical and moral values. The present article sets forth a series of practical methodologies for the interpretation of biblical books, with a view to developing interpretative, historical-axiological, and critical skills.

Keywords: Bible, method, exegesis, context, axiology.

The Bible has been likened to a stream that is so shallow that a lamb can drink from it, and so deep that an elephant can bathe in it (Gregory the Great).

The Bible is undoubtedly the greatest bestseller of all time. Its stories have survived for thousands of years. This seems to be something quite natural in view of the fact that the Bible has been translated into 3,756 languages (the entire Bible: 756 languages; the New Testament: 1,726 languages; excerpts: 1,274 languages), that it is conveyed through literature, music, art, dance, film, etc., and it is considered the 'great key text' of art and poetry.

The imagery is not the only element that distinguishes the Bible from our world; the Bible's global context is incongruent with ours. This renders interpretation even more arduous. The writers of the Bible reported their experiences from a perspective largely foreign to the modern reader. The following example will illustrate this point. In Genesis 1:1, the Bible writer can confidently speak of the firmament that Yahweh created¹. It has now been established with a high degree of certainty that there is no firmament in the biblical sense. The blue that arches above our heads is not a stretched blue cloth or anything of the sort, but rather a phenomenon with light that can be compared to the green of clear water. This example does not give rise to any significant misunderstandings. When perusing

¹ All references to the Bible are from: World English Bible, [in:] <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/World-English-Bible-WEB/#booklist>.

the Bible, one may do so with the assurance of an accurate interpretation, unmarred by misinterpretation, regarding the creation of the firmament.

The same biblical author also provides an account of the first man, Adam, who resided with his wife, Eve, in the Garden of Eden. However, as research into human history progresses, the notion of a primordial human couple in the Garden of Eden becomes increasingly untenable. Instead, the evidence suggests that the earliest humans were likely highly primitive herd animals, far less developed than the image portrayed by Adam in the Book of Genesis. This makes reading the Bible more arduous. Some individuals who engage with the Bible may encounter challenges when interpreting the narrative of Adam and Eve, as they do when trying to comprehend the creation of the firmament. The world from which the writer of Genesis 1 draws his insights and experiences, and from which he writes to proclaim Yahweh as the Creator, was a world that saw the firmament as something created above it, just as it believed in a first human couple. This was indicative of the era's cognitive capacity.

When engaging with biblical texts, it is imperative to acknowledge a fundamental truth: these texts are historical documents originally intended for their era's audience. The contemporary reader of the Book of Books, therefore, is confronted with a communication strategy that is wholly divergent from that which prevails today. The following questions are of particular pertinence: To whom, if anyone, was the text addressed? The subsequent investigation will seek to identify the specific socio-cultural realities that influenced the creation of the text. The core message and the essential meaning of the text must therefore be determined. The question of the tradition, linguistic form, and literary genre in which it fulfilled its parenetic function remains unanswered.

The clarification of these questions establishes a foundation for both analytical and interpretative endeavours. This phenomenon enables the communication of a text from the distant past to contemporary readers. The act of accepting and listening to the 'speech' of the biblical text occurs on various levels: in academic work, in individual reading and meditation, in conversation in a small or larger group, and in pastoral preaching. These levels can overlap and narrow in numerous ways. Group conversation appears to be the most productive. It is acknowledged that the present text is not designed to provide exhaustive responses to the queries it raises. However, it is posited that it may catalyse further exploration of the biblical content by individual participants. The following reflections present methodologies that facilitate group discussion and enable a designated biblical passage to be contemplated from a distinct viewpoint each time. It is essential to acknowledge that some contemporary readers will not only encounter a conduit to a bygone era but will also frequently face a seemingly familiar obstacle. A significant proportion of biblical texts is not assimilated consciously. This is because, upon encountering the initial words of a text, the recipient typically disengages their cognitive processes and categorises the entire text as memory, thereby effectively addressing the mat-

ter. The audience no longer anticipates any unexpected elements from the text, and it is regarded as a predictable entity that cannot surprise them.

In a similar fashion to how people can be objectified inappropriately and thus reduced to familiar 'objects', biblical texts, too, can be deprived of the opportunity to speak to us. The employment of updated methods frequently engenders a sense of vitality by offering an unfamiliar perspective on the text. The participants in the discussion will be astonished to discover aspects that had previously remained concealed from them. The following section outlines potential updates.

Methods for Getting to Know the Biblical Text

The formulation of questions. In the context of biblical group work, the provision of introductory questions to participants, along with relevant biblical texts, has been shown to foster a stimulating environment. The utilisation of written queries has been demonstrated to facilitate the work. Questions can be employed to emphasise salient points in the text, with the responses to these questions subsequently serving as the foundation for the ensuing discourse. This objective approach is a fundamental component of the scholarly method, as exemplified in the Bible discussion.

The functional structure method is employed. For Jews, the wording of the text and its structure were of paramount importance. Numerous sentences and thoughts are repeated in a particular manner to elucidate the meaning literally between the lines (a phenomenon referred to as parallelism, as evidenced in the Psalms). Specific passages have been meticulously crafted in a symmetrical (concentric) manner, thereby enabling the central content (word) to be perceived distinctively. Within these poles, the structural layout of the biblical pericope develops, i.e., individual elements of the plot are combined according to specific rules to form a complete work of art. The conventional structure of a narrative comprises five constituent elements: exposition, which encompasses the initial situation, the theme, the problem, the primary characters, and details of time and place; rising action, wherein the narrative's logic gradually accumulates, resulting in increasingly intricate plotlines; a turning point, representing a pivotal moment in the narrative where the primary character must make a critical decision; falling action, which ensues after the turning point, whereby the tension in the biblical narrative originates from the progression or unravelling of plot twists; and finally, the conclusion, whereupon either all issues are resolved or become unsolvable.

The initial and concluding methodology. The commencement and conclusion of a biblical narrative are of paramount importance for reading. At the outset of a narrative, the reader is engrossed in a fictional universe governed by its own set of laws, encountering a variety of characters and receiving specific reading instructions. The package offers a comprehensive experience, with the narrative

unfolding until its conclusion. Participants encounter a range of elements, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and are presented with both solutions and ambiguity. They are also confronted with conventional clichés and offered an alternative programme. The framing passages of a narrative form the outer poles of understanding; they are significant for the story's conceptual and content-related consistency. An alternative method of elucidating the primary themes of a biblical text is to engage in discourse or to relate the substance of the text. This method is especially well-suited for extended texts characterised by narrative content.

The process of editing headlines. To ascertain the primary theme of a given text, one may also undertake a collective search for a suitable heading for the selected biblical text. The act of searching for section headings requires a focus on the content and intended message. There is consensus on the choice of language for the title: whether it should be in the language of the New Testament or in modern parlance.

The selection of verses. To ascertain the primary theme of a given text, it would be beneficial for the participants in the discussion to select the essential verse(s) of a section and provide a justification for their selection during the discussion.

A search for keywords is recommended. In this instance, the participants in the discussion are tasked with identifying and annotating the passages in the text they deem significant. Once the salient words have been underlined, the text becomes more accessible to the reader. The text's visual structure facilitates the identification of salient points for subsequent discussion.

Bible study involves a meticulous examination of the texts, frequently supported by additional sources such as concordances, Bible commentaries, dictionaries, and atlases. Such an undertaking requires significant time and commitment; however, it offers a profound opportunity to develop a comprehensive understanding of the historical context, cultural background, and literary genealogy of the Book of Books. This approach is frequently employed in an academic context, yet it is also utilised by individuals who aspire to explore the intricacies of the Bible on their own.

The implicit reader method is employed here. To delineate the distinction between textual and extra-textual reality, it is necessary to draw attention to the different author-reader instances within a narrative, which have played an immense role in narrative text research. At an extra-textual level, the real author and the real reader must be mentioned; these are to be understood as historical-biblical persons. At the text-internal level, a distinction is made between the explicit author-reader instance, which can be identified as a fictional entity in the world of the text (e.g. I, the narrator), and the so-called implicit author and reader, who represent the sum of all the offers for meaning constitution present in the text. The concept of the hidden reader facilitates the identification of the interface between reality and fiction through so-called 'gaps' that challenge the reader to actively engage in constructing meaning within the biblical text.

Text Comparisons

Comparative reading facilitates the analysis of the same stories described in different books of the Bible. This proves to be of great value in the case of the fragments of poems about the creation of the world from the Book of Genesis and the Book of Psalms; and the descriptions of miracles, teachings, and parables from the Gospels, which differ from one another². The employment of the comparative method facilitates comprehension of the divergent perspectives and emphases that individual authors ascribe to analogous events. The comparison of disparate accounts has been demonstrated to unveil latent meanings and facilitate the discernment of a statement's underlying essence.

A comparison of analogous biblical texts can facilitate a more profound comprehension of the nature of a given text. The process is made more straightforward when the selected texts are arranged side by side on a worksheet. This approach facilitates the identification of both similarities and differences. Following a formal comparison of the texts, the significance of the observed differences and similarities should be determined. The use of comparative analyses facilitates a deeper understanding of the message conveyed by each text.

A comparison of translations and renditions. A fascinating avenue for exploration lies in comparing biblical texts across diverse Bible translations. A divergence in content and linguistic expression is apparent. Texts that are rendered very differently in the respective translations or renditions are particularly suitable. The objective of the group work would be to identify the translation that resonates most strongly with the participants and to provide a rationale for their selection. The value of such work lies in its potential to offer axiological benefits, provided it is conducted on the basis of various Bible translations or renditions intended for children and young people. In this context, particular attention should be paid to the quality of the sacred language (including the imagery).

Synoptic comparison. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are collectively termed 'Synoptic Gospels' (from the Greek *synopsis*, meaning 'overview'). A close examination of the first three Gospels reveals numerous similarities and significant differences. Despite the fact that many of the same events from the life of Jesus are reported, these differences demonstrate that each of the evangelists has his own specific religious perspective on the mystery of Jesus. Synoptic narratives are of particular interest in the study of the Gospels, as they allow for the comparison of the views of the individual evangelists. This, in turn, provides the reader with a more complete understanding of Jesus' human character. Participants are required to have either a sufficient number of synopses of the New Testament or worksheets on which the synoptic texts are written side by side.

² „The biblical literature contains a range of extended comparisons, from strict parables that have a single correspondence between the story and reality (Luke 16:1–8) to full allegories in which all features have a comparison with something in reality (Mark 4:1–9, 13–20)“ . (H.A. Virkler / K.G. Ayayo, *Hermeneutics. Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, Grand Rapids 2007, p. 118–119).

The termination of variants. In instances where a biblical account concludes with an open ending, it becomes feasible to conceptualise a freely devised conclusion. For instance, one could consider reactions to various miracles or ask how each event would be received today. Moreover, the New Testament comprises parables with divergent conclusions. A comparison of the two reveals that they express different intentions on the part of the evangelist.

Contrasting texts. Texts originating from the internet, newspapers, song lyrics, and literature that are related to a biblical theme can be compared with the biblical text. It is paramount to include a variety of opinions on the same topic. By juxtaposing the statements made in the contrasting text (perhaps a provocative text) and the biblical text, the genuine biblical message can be clearly highlighted.

The Actant Model is a theoretical framework that examines the various roles of action present within biblical texts. The present analysis employs a tripartite division of actants – subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, and opponent – to delineate the relationships among the characters in the biblical narrative, to demonstrate the interplay of action at three distinct levels. In the course of analysing the syntactic relationships between the sentences in the text, the relationship between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ is first encountered. The contrasting pair ‘sender-receiver’ refers to the level of communication in the text. The level of the circumstances of the action, embodied by the contrasting pair ‘helper-opponent’, is of a more substantial nature.

Text Design

Compilation. In this method, participants are tasked with creating a text utilising a variety of Bible translations. Expressions of their own must not be inserted, but instead the most appropriate verses or passages are used. A variety of translations must be made available for this work.

The translations have been prepared by the author. Should one possess a certain degree of familiarity with biblical texts and the manner of thinking that characterises them, it is possible to translate a text (for example, the Psalms) into the language of the present day. In this process, participants endeavour to convey the text’s message by incorporating their own values and images. This approach has the potential to infuse biblical texts with renewed vitality and relevance in the modern context.

Supplementing biblical texts. The New Testament frequently enumerates various groups of people, behaviours, and tasks. One could attempt to extend these lists to encompass contemporary circumstances, thereby, in a sense, continuing them into the present day. For instance, the catalogue of tasks and charisms enumerated in Romans 12:3–8 is complemented by a contemporary list of tasks that must be executed within society. This approach is advantageous in that it offers a dual benefit: firstly, it provides a framework for discussing current issues

and problems; and secondly, it facilitates the addition of new keywords to the text, thereby enhancing the text's semantic richness. Examples of such lists include the contemporary forms of helping in Matthew 25:31–46, the poor to be invited today in Luke 14:12–14, Paul's co-workers in Romans 16:1–16, and catalogues of virtues updated to today's standards in Colossians 3:5–17.

The preparation of a lay sermon. It is recommended that the following worksheet be utilised as a foundation for group work to prepare a lay sermon.

What? The message conveyed by the text is as follows: The following investigation will seek to ascertain the contents of the selected biblical text. The next step is to formulate a title for the text. This should be a concise summary of its central theme. It is essential to consider whether the text's content is self-evident to its intended audience. The question to be addressed here is whether the content can be expressed in a manner consistent with contemporary language. The question of how such content would be formulated in the mass media is a complex one. The following question is posed for consideration: Is it possible to establish parallels between the past and the present about groups of people, life situations, and life problems? The question that arises is whether it is possible to carry the thoughts of the text forward into our time.

Why? The intention of the lay preacher is as follows: The objective of this discourse is to explore the potential outcomes of such a sermon. The formulation of this objective in written form is imperative. To determine the most effective means of achieving the desired result, it is first necessary to identify what the listener needs in their particular situation. The question that must be posed is that of the encouragement and guidance required.

For whom? The issue of motivation is pivotal in this context, and it is imperative to determine whether the content aligns with the listeners' concerns. **Dialogical:** The following discussion will address the difficulties experienced by the listeners, which are generally life difficulties arising from the text. The question must be posed: Is the issue being avoided? The question is posed as to whether the listeners' world of experience is present. This text serves as an illustration of a lay sermon, but it also functions as a paradigm for integrating visual and experiential elements into one's life.

Rephrasing. The relevance of biblical texts extends beyond their content to encompass their form as well. For instance, promotional and inviting texts are crafted as newspaper advertisements; stories are presented as newspaper reports; and Paul's concerns, as expressed in his letters, are rephrased as a letter addressed to contemporary readers. The crux of the biblical passages must be accurately captured. This method facilitates a thorough and attentive engagement with the biblical text, while concurrently offering a novel perspective on the contemporary context.

The craftsmanship of the work is evident. If sufficient time is available during a Bible seminar, an artistic design approach can be employed. Participants are invited to design a biblical theme in drawings or to create collages using pictures cut out of magazines. Another possibility is to illustrate biblical texts with

images or sound. A significant component of group activity entails the interpretation and discussion of results following the creative phase.

Staging. Biblical texts, which often have a dramatic character, can be performed either by reading or by acting out the assigned roles. The following forms may be considered: reading with assigned roles, improvisational play, and role conversation. It is recommended that these attempts at presentation be followed by a group discussion.

Approaches to Joint Anthropological and Existential Appropriation

To elucidate the anthropological and existential dimensions of biblical texts, participants must articulate their responses to the texts. To undertake this task, it is first necessary to possess a comprehensive understanding of the biblical text. Furthermore, the guidance of a competent group leader is essential in ensuring that the group does not deviate from the text's original message. The focus of these methods is not on discussion but on articulating experiences with the text. Participants are expected to demonstrate active engagement with the text and with the contributions of their discussion partners. These methods require meticulous preparation by the discussion leader to ensure the discussion remains firmly grounded in biblical thinking. A prerequisite for such 'anthropological-existential' discourses is a meditative reading of the biblical text, followed by a period of reflection. It is only in this manner that a productive discussion may be initiated.

Thematic reading involves selecting excerpts from biblical texts that answer particular questions or address specific subjects. A range of topics, including life, love, suffering and justice, can be selected for analysis to understand the Bible's position on each of these topics. Reading passages on a specific topic across multiple books enables the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the biblical message. This method is beneficial when dealing with a particular topic that is of utmost importance to the reader at that moment³.

The Västerås Method. The nomenclature of this method derives from its geographical origins: Västerås, Sweden⁴. The following methodology is employed. Participants are expected to engage with the biblical text independently and reflect on its contents. Markings may be made in the margin of the text for individual verses: if a given passage is unclear, a question mark may be used; if a verse evokes a particular spiritual insight, an exclamation mark may be used; if it evokes existential concern, an arrow may be used. At the commencement of the discussion, participants who have indicated they have a query use a question mark to pose their question. Answers to these questions are sought either from the group

³ *Methodes d'étude creative de la Bible*, p. 203–207, [in:] creative-bible-study-methods-(french).pdf (accessed 21 IX 2025).

⁴ P. Blowes, *Motivated, reproducing, applied Bible reading. The Swedish Method*, [in:] <https://gotherfor.com/offer.php?intid=28725&changestore=true> (accessed 25 IX 2025).

itself or from the leader. The discussion of existential concern demands particular discretion. The method has the potential to result in a particularly intensive appropriation of the text, given that participants' immediate understanding can be brought into the discussion. Texts that are deemed particularly suitable are those which do not possess a single point of meaning. Illustrative examples of such texts include admonitions, proverbs, and speech compositions. Participants should be provided with the relevant texts as worksheets, with ample margins for notes.

Biblical associations. Facilitating a Bible discussion can be improved by encouraging participants to articulate their personal connections to the biblical text under consideration. This establishes a connection between the personal horizon of consciousness and experience with the biblical text⁵. The 'brainstorming' method is similar in nature, whereby discussion participants express their ideas about a biblical text, which are then collected and organised by the discussion leader. This approach fosters a diversity of perspectives, thereby enriching the group's understanding of the subject. This method finds particular application in the context of biblical symbols, which, when considered alongside personal experience and attitudes, can be rendered more vivid and meaningful.

The process of identifying with events described in the Bible. This method is predicated on the assumption that the biblical text is intended to address its individual reader. The selected biblical texts are thus interpreted as a description of what happens within human beings themselves; they are therefore 'life stories' in the sense that they express the essence of human existence in images. For instance, in the context of a miracle narrative, one might consider how much the reader can identify with the healed individual, exploring the underlying factors that led to their illness and the subsequent healing process. Furthermore, identification with the biblical figure is also a conceivable outcome. In this context, it is essential to consider how discipleship is practised in everyday life. Narratives of a miraculous or vocational nature are especially well-suited to this objective.

Révision de vie. A prerequisite for a 'révision de vie' is an atmosphere of trust within a group and, concomitantly, absolute discretion. The utilisation of biblical texts as a medium for discourse on life challenges and the examination of each individual's unique circumstances is a practice that merits consideration.

Bible meditation. A variety of conversational forms exist within which the meditation experiences of individual participants are shared. The practice of meditation requires a silent, contemplative environment. Following a period of contemplation on a biblical text (or an image selected for the topic), the participants are invited to articulate their insights, experiences, and suggestions. The practice of meditation on a biblical text is also possible and can be achieved through metaphorical meditation. The purpose of this study is to establish a comparison for the purpose of examining biblical expressions or images. Love can be likened to...; Freedom can be likened to...; Humanity can be likened to...; and so on. The

⁵ D. Rempe (Hrsg.), *41 Methoden zum Bibellesen mit Gruppen*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2012, p. 46–47.

participants were then instructed to formulate their comparisons in written form. These are then collected by the discussion leader and read aloud to the group. This can subsequently lead to a discussion of the various metaphors.

The act of reading a book is not merely a matter of arranging letters and sentences in a sequence, or of committing them to memory, or of repeating them back. This principle pertains to all literary works, including the Bible. It is imperative to assess whether an individual has comprehended a literary work, for otherwise the act of reading would be futile. The process of attaining comprehension is facilitated by research, dialogue, and study. When the question is posed, 'Do you understand what you are reading?', a different set of circumstances is observed. The inquiry commences with the elementary inquiries regarding interpretation. New findings in historical research have provided further insights into specific passages in the Bible. A more profound comprehension of the process of the Bible's creation, and of the individual books and writings of the Bible, imparts a refined ability to decipher its contents and discern the rationale behind its composition. Refined methodologies can illuminate hitherto unacknowledged subtleties inherent in the texts under scrutiny. Moreover, the advent of mass media, particularly the Internet, has rendered the Bible more accessible to the general public than ever before. Regardless of the chosen methodology, engaging with the Bible can be an intellectual adventure for interested parties, leading to a deeper understanding of the text itself and its influence on European and global culture. The corpus of human wisdom is encapsulated within the pages of a book. It acquiesces to being confined to the limited space of a text, even to the point of being prepared to die within the rigid structure of the written word, in order to be resurrected in the infinite number of everyday situations and made available to an endless number of readers of different times and cultures.

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Strategie studiowania *Biblii* w programie edukacji humanistycznej

Abstrakt

Program edukacji humanistycznej obejmuje analizę materiałów biblijnych jako źródła toposów, symboli, gatunków literackich i uniwersalnych metafor. Istotne miejsce na liście lektur humanistycznych zajmują dogłębne refleksje na temat wielokulturowego i ponadczasowego wpływu Biblii na

literaturę i sztukę oraz badanie jej wartości etyczno-moralnych. Artykuł zawiera szereg praktycznych metod interpretacji ksiąg biblijnych, mających na celu rozwijanie umiejętności interpretacyjnych, historyczno-aksjologicznych i krytycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: Biblia, metoda, egzegeza, kontekst, aksjologia.

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