

## Ruminations on Studying the Bible as Literature

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The Bible “is not merely a sacred book but a book so remorselessly and continuously sacred that it does not invite, it excludes or repels, the merely aesthetic [or literary] approach.”

~ C. S. Lewis

*The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version*. Philadelphia: Fortress P, 1967. 33.

“[...] those who talk of reading the Bible ‘as literature’ sometimes mean, I think, reading it without attending to the main thing it is about.”

~ C. S. Lewis

*Reflections on the Psalms*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1958: 2-3.

“The Bible forms the lowest stratum in the teaching of literature. It should be taught so early and so thoroughly that it sinks straight to the bottom of the mind, where everything that comes along later can settle on it. [...] The Bible [...] should be the basis of literary training.”

~ Northrop Frye

*The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1964), pp. 110-111.

## The Bible in Public Education

“Are we allowed to learn about the Bible in public school? Isn’t that against the separation of church and state?”

If the Bible were presented as faith, teaching the Bible in school would be contrary to the spirit of the Constitution. But you don't have to look far to see that the contents of the Bible are part of everyday life. Some of that can be seen on the map of the United States. From Maine to California, you see the influence of the Bible in place names, such as New Canaan, Lebanon, Bethlehem, Salem, Corpus Christi (Latin for “Body of Christ”). The Bible also influenced life, work, and culture. For decades, the Bible was used as a textbook—sometimes the only textbook—in public school classrooms. It was and is a book shared by a majority of the people in the country.

As the country became more religiously and culturally diverse, different translations and versions of the Bible were readily available. There soon developed a concern that the use of the Bible in reading class or as the source of daily devotion could lead to sectarian teaching. Over time, the Bible and public education was limited to a daily devotional reading without comment. In 1963, the Supreme Court struck down all state-sponsored religious exercises, including devotional reading of the Bible. Yet in that very court decision, Justice Thomas Clark wrote:

**Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.**

*Abington vs. Schempp*

Still, it seemed a safer course for public education to pull back from granting the Bible a role in the school or classroom. Nonetheless, over the years, educators have seen that not to grant the Bible any place in public education is, in many ways, to offer an incomplete education. It is important, however, to understand that

teaching about the Bible can be done legally if such instruction follows the letter and the spirit of the First Amendment. It is the design and purpose of this study unit to do just that. The seminar you are studying has some very important characteristics built in, so that it follows that First Amendment. Here is the approach you will be following:

1. You are going to study the Bible academically, not devotionally. In other words, you are learning about the Bible and its role in life, language, and culture.
2. You will be given an awareness of religious content of the Bible, but you will not be pressed into accepting religion.
3. You will study about religion as presented in the Bible, but you will not be engaged in the practice of religion.
4. During this course, you will encounter differing religious views, but the views will neither be encouraged nor discouraged.
5. You will never be asked to conform to any of the beliefs you encounter in this course.