

Should the Bible be taught as a literary classic in public education?

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Abstract

The research question *Should the Bible be taught as a literary classic in public education?* was pursued by a survey of nineteen scholars from three disciplines: education, literature, and law. The collected data served to guide the researcher in the writing of an analytical essay responding to the research question. The research question is addressed after the data enabled the researcher to respond to three prerequisite questions: (1) What are the qualifications of a literary classic? (2) Is the Bible a literary classic? (3) Even if the Bible is a literary classic, does it necessarily follow that it should be taught in public schools?

Keywords: Bible, classics, curriculum, education, law, and literature



Research Question

Should the Bible Be Taught as a Literary Classic in Public Education?

Mark Twain said, “a classic is a book which people praise but don’t read” (Rasmussen, 1998). Twain’s overstatement notwithstanding, if literary classics go largely unread it would imply a curricular issue. In primary and secondary public education a school year consists of approximately 1,100 hours of scheduled, in-school time. One study reported that students received 333 hours of actual instruction (Weinstein and Mignano, 2003). If this alarming statistic is accurate, the need to use instructional time effectively is indisputable.

What to teach? This is a continuing curricular question for all teachers, regardless of their discipline. Discerning the literature that ought to be read is no small matter for English teachers, for whom there are so many books and so little time. What should students read and ponder? In order for this question to be insignificant two conditions would have to exist. One, all literature would have to be of equal value. Two, the deployment of instructional time would have to be a trivial concern. The existence of the category *literary classic* establishes that all literature is not of equal value. The attention educators give to scheduling and lesson planning constitutes their pragmatic declaration that the utilization of instructional time does matter.

The research question (*Should the Bible be taught as a literary classic in public education?*) is a curricular issue with legal implications calling for expert testimony from literary scholars. Further, this research question spawns two other questions. (1) Is the Bible a literary classic? (2) If the Bible is a classic, does it necessarily follow that it should be included in the curriculum of all schools, public and private?

Literature Review

This following review is presented in three subdivisions: *curricular*, *legal*, and *literary*. Although this material is organized in distinct subsections, the curricular, legal, and literary considerations have overlapped whenever this question has been addressed as a practical matter.

Curricular

In 1993 the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools was founded by Elizabeth Ridenour to organize a nationwide movement to require the inclusion of the Bible as literature in public school education. The following statement is from the NCBCPS website:

A program is underway to serve the public through educational efforts concerning a First Amendment right and religious freedom issue. This is to bring a state certified Bible course (elective) into public high schools nationwide (Ridenour, 2005).

For many years Biblical material was part of the curriculum in American public education. The *McGuffey’s Readers*, a staple of public education in the nineteenth century, included Biblical references (Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil, 2002). It was not until 1963 that religious language in public schools, written or spoken, was ruled unconstitutional (*Abingdon v. Schempp*, 1963; *Murray v. Curlett*, 1963).

In 1954 Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote, “Today education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. ... It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it

is a principle instrument in awakening the child to cultural values ...” (Brown v. Board of Education). The prohibition of religious literature and language in public schools concerned those who reasoned that virtuous character could not be nurtured without religious material. Extrapolating from Justice Warren’s opinion, they asked rhetorically, “If one of the purposes of education is the nurturance of good citizenship, how could that be effected without a deliberate effort to develop virtuous character? And how can virtuous character be taught without Biblical instruction?”

By the 1970’s a secular approach to character education, *values clarification*, had gained substantial acceptance among educators (Kirschenbaum and Simon, 1972). To the chagrin of its advocates, this movement contained the seeds of its own destruction and was short-lived. Rather than inculcating a moral code, *values clarification* nurtured in students the belief that moral absolutes are nonexistent and concepts of *right* and *wrong* are irrelevant in discussions of morality (Bloom, 1987).

In the eighties and nineties psychological investigations of moral development provided data that have influenced character education to the present. Lawrence Kohlberg’s Moral Stages Theory seems ubiquitous in the literature of character education (1981, 1984). Only slightly less referenced is the work of Carol Gilligan (1982). The research of psychiatrist John Robert Coles spans three decades and is presented in eight volumes in which the moral and spiritual development of children are analyzed (1990). In 1992 William Kirk Kilpatrick’s *Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right from Wrong* offered a constructive evaluation of character education with an emphasis on the role of literature in teaching values.

The 1999 Columbine High School killing spree had the effect of intensifying the interest of teachers and administrators in character education. Daniel Goleman’s introduction of *emotional intelligence* added to the conversation concerning the moral life of children (1995). Thomas Lickona has achieved national recognition as an authority on character education owing to his seven books on the subject (2004).

Legal

In the *School District of Abingdon v. Schempp*, Justice Thomas Clark opined, “It may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities” (1963). The ruling in this case allows for the inclusion of the Bible in a public school curriculum provided that it is taught academically and not devotionally. This decision notwithstanding, recent disputes like those in Frankenmuth, Michigan (*Associated Press*, 2005) and Odessa, Texas (*Associated Press*, 2005) as well as earlier litigation in Florida (*Gibson v. Lee County School Board*) demonstrate the unsettled state of this issue.

History shows that the courts are familiar with curricular issues in public education. In 1925 a Dayton, Tennessee biology teacher, John T. Scopes, was arrested and tried for teaching Darwinian Theory in violation of the state’s Butler Act. Ironic is that eighty years ago the issue was the acceptability of a secular book, Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* (1859), which seemed to challenge a Biblical narrative. Neither are the courts unfamiliar with disputes involving religious practice in a public school. In *Murray v. Curlett*, the Supreme Court ruled that teacher-initiated prayer with students violated the principle of the separation of church and state (1963). Whether or not this separation is actually articulated in the *Constitution* is itself a matter of a long-running debate.

Literary

A dictionary definition of *classic* is, “of the highest class; being a model of its kind; excellent; standard; authoritative; established” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 1973, p. 248). In spite of a dictionary definition, the *canon wars* rage among literary scholars. Concerning this academic conflict, one scholar, who opted for confidentiality in this study, wrote:

... many people have been questioning the very concept over the last 20 years or so in what are often called the “canon” wars: what should be considered authoritative text and what should not and according to what standard(s)? ... Nonetheless, we might still say that a literary classic remains a piece of literature that has great aesthetic merit and is an enduring source of human value, but that still begs the questions: what’s “aesthetic merit” and what’s “human value?”

The criteria for a literary classic provided by Abrams’ *Glossary of Literary Terms* is a text that is kept in print, discussed frequently by scholars, and likely to be included in anthologies and college courses meets the standard for a classic (1993). Perhaps Mark Twain’s assessment of a classic is not as wry as he intended. Implicit in Abram’s criteria is the belief that a classic is something most people should read, even if they have not.

This brief literature review has come to full circle. Given the limited resource of time, what to include in and exclude from the curriculum of any discipline requires Solomon like wisdom. The propriety of including in public school curricula a literary work that is foundational for several religions is an inescapable legal issue. Nevertheless, judicial deliberation on this matter would be incomplete without expert testimony from literary scholars.

Methodology

Sample

The intention of data gathering in this study was to acquire expert testimony from scholars from three disciplines: education, law, and literature. This testimony was organized, analyzed, and applied to the research question. Without a presentation and analysis of data a response to this question would have constituted an opinion essay rather than a research article.

A *random sample* is a representative group used in survey research, “in which every person in the population being studied has an equal chance of inclusion” (Myers, 1999, p. 24). The sample in this study is *not* a random sample. It was not the intention of this research to provide opinions that are representative of all scholars in the fields of education, law, and literature. The participants in this study were selected because of their credentials and accomplishments. Their opinions are to be respected as authoritative, but not as representative of what all or even most of the scholars in each of the disciplines believe. The data gathered from the sample influenced me in responding to the research question. In my response are recurring references to the data.

In this study the opinions of thirty scholars from the fields of education, law, and literature were sought. Nineteen scholars responded, distributed as follows: ten from education, six from literature, and three from the law. The percentage of return is 63.3 percent with $s = 19$. The qua-

lification for the selection of each participant was either an earned doctorate in one of the three disciplines or practice in one of the disciplines or both. With regard to practice, their work experience is relevant to the research question. For example, one of the participants is a high school English teacher. Although this individual does not have a doctorate, over twenty years of teaching literature in a public school gave weight to this person's opinions.

Data Collection

A four question survey was mailed to each of the participants, either electronically or as hard copy by way of postal mail. Postal mail was used when an e-mail address was not available. A cover letter explaining this research project was included with the surveys. A self-addressed, stamped envelope was included with the surveys sent as postal mail.

Data was retrieved either as e-mail responses or postal mail. Provision was made for the option of confidentiality. The participants were asked if they would prefer not being identified by description or name in the manuscript to be produced for publication.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data was organized quantitatively by recording the number of *agree* and *disagree* responses to questions I and III. The number of *yes* and *no* responses to questions II and IV also was recorded. All four questions allowed for written comments, providing the participants with opportunities to elaborate beyond a one-word response. All of the comments were recorded for analysis. The various comments were compared and contrasted. As previously stated, the end of this investigation was an analytical piece rather than an opinion article.

Presentation of the Findings

In this section a reproduction of the survey is presented with the accumulated data and comments presented in **bold type**.

Research Question: *Should the Bible be taught as a literary classic in public education?*

I. What is a literary classic?

It must have international recognition as a literary work of extraordinary merit?

Agree: 6 Disagree: 4 (Education)

Agree: 2 Disagree: 4 (Literature)

Agree: 0 Disagree: 3 (Law)

Agree: 8 Disagree: 11 (Total)

It must have consensus recognition among literary scholars as a work of extraordinary significance and excellence.

Agree: 10 Disagree: 0 (Education)

Agree: 4 Disagree: 2 (Literature)

Agree: 3 Disagree: 0 (Law)

Agree: 17 Disagree: 2

It must have endured at least two generations as a widely read work. (Two generations equals forty years.)

Agree: 4 Disagree: 6 (Education)
Agree: 4 Disagree: 2 (Literature)
Agree: 3 Disagree: 0 (Law)
Agree: 11 Disagree: 8 (Total)

It must have a significant influence on at least one of the following: subsequent literature, social movements, or historical events.

Agree: 8 Disagree: 2 (Education)
Agree: 4 Disagree: 2 (Literature)
Agree: 3 Disagree: 0 (Law)
Agree: 15 Disagree: 4 (Total)

Comments:

Who qualifies as a literary scholar?

There are dangers in making the designation for “classic” exclusive, thus restricting multiculturalism or gender in making the determination.

Why two generations? (No “instant classics” then!)

(A classic) must have recognition of merit in a culture and have consensus recognition among literary scholars in that culture.

Many literary classics are regional rather than international in their acceptance as literary classics. Multigenerational reading is important in determining what’s a classic, but it is not exclusively a prerequisite or defining feature in itself.

There is neither adequate time nor space to comment on each of these.

(A classic) could be fewer years (than forty).

A work like Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* is not widely read but is clearly a classic. (The) *Poisonwood Bible* comes to mind as well.

II. The Bible is in the category of classic literature.

Yes: 9 No: 1 (Education)
Yes: 6 No: 0 (Literature)
Yes: 3 No: 0 (Law)
Yes: 18 No: 1 (Total)

Comments:

There are myriad allusions to the Bible in other “classics.” It would be difficult to teach Hawthorne, Shakespeare, Milton, Morrison, etc. without clarifying Biblical references. In its own right the Bible certainly fits the criteria stated above. Finally, the beautiful parables are instructive and entertaining.

I say yes if we’re identifying “The Bible” as the 1611 King James translation. Modern versions, no! Middle or Old English versions, probably not.

Yes, but it’s in a special category of classic literature: literature that has been made sacred and at the center of a religion.

III. Is there any reason(s) why any literary classic should not be taught?

Even a literary classic should not be taught if the teacher intends to use it for religious, social, or political proselytizing.

Agree: 10 Disagree: 0 (Education)

Agree: 6 Disagree: 0 (Literature)

Agree: 3 Disagree: 0 (Law)

Total: 19 Disagree: 0 (Total)

A literary classic should not be taught by a teacher who does not agree that the work is a classic.

Agree: 0 Disagree: 10 (Education)

Agree: 1 Disagree: 5 (Literature)

Agree: 0 Disagree: 3 (Law)

Agree: 1 Disagree: 18 (Total)

A literary classic should not be taught by a teacher who has antipathy for the literary work.

Agree: 0 Disagree: 10 (Education)

Agree: 1 Disagree: 5 (Literature)

Agree: 0 Disagree: 3 (Law)

Agree: 1 Disagree: 18 (Total)

Theological books that religions have embraced as sacred cannot be taught as mere literature. Therefore, they should not be taught as literature.

Agree: 1 Disagree: 9 (Education)

Agree: 0 Disagree: 6 (Literature)

Agree: 0 Disagree: 3 (Law)

Agree: 1 Disagree: 18 (Total)

A theological book should not be taught by someone who does not have a formal theological education.

Agree: 0 Disagree: 10 (Education)

Agree: 0 Disagree: 6 (Literature)

Agree: 0 Disagree: 3 (Law)

Agree: 0 Disagree: 19 (Total)

Comments:

How mature is the teacher? Are any of us as objective as we should be? It certainly would test the skills of the teacher.

Does that mean we can't or should not teach mythology? (Or, for that matter, Native American literature?)

If it is taught as literature, why should a formal theological education be necessary? Do we need a divinity degree to teach the parable of the talents as used in Milton's sonnet? Should we not teach Paradise Lost?

I disagree with all of these as absolute statements. A teacher should state her bias and limitations. (For instance, a teacher of literature should say she's dealing with the Psalms as poetry, not as theology.)

Should a teacher who would proselytize for any cause be allowed to teach at all?

It's best not to teach works for which the teacher feels antipathy. If a teacher is aware of feelings of antipathy, the teacher should say so (and say why). But the work may still appear on the syllabus.

While an in-depth theological education is not necessary for a literature teacher to teach the Bible, I think that a background in the textual history of the Bible canon and sprinkling of Hebrew and/or Latin and Greek should be part of the instructor's background – especially at the college level.

When teaching *The Catcher in the Rye*, I customarily "taught" relevant Bible passages. The parable of the crazy man in the tombs (Legion) comes to mind.

Again, I'd need a year and 500 pages to fully comment.

IV. The Bible is in the category of literary classics that should not be taught in public education.

Yes: 1 No: 9 (Education)

Yes: 1 No: 5 (Literature)

Yes: 0 No: 3 (Law)

Yes: 2 No: 17 (Total)

Comments:

I feel that a “Bible as Literature” class would be a valuable addition to the curriculum.

I teach at a Christian college and am comfortable teaching the Bible. If I taught in a public school I would hesitate to do so, and would incorporate it only to illustrate a specific point relevant to other concerns in the course.

I think the Bible could be used in public education as long as the literary teacher focuses exclusively on the poetry, genre, and literary qualities (such as plot, characterization, rhetoric, imagery, and so on) or in the work compare and contrast with other contemporary religious texts in the Middle East or the non-western cultures – that would also be ideal as long as the comparison does not degenerate into an assessment of the comparative values of each religion.

A person cannot be well educated without some familiarity with the Bible.

No literary classic should not be taught! Objections to works like Huckleberry Finn are specious, as are those to Shakespeare’s plays.

Yes, given the current climate in which it would not likely be taught as a mere narrative but as the only true narrative.

V. Do you want the results of this survey and the article that will feature this survey sent to you?

Yes: 9 No: 1 (Education)
Yes: 6 No: 0 (Literature)
Yes: 2 No: 1 (Law)
Yes: 17 No: 2 (Total)

VI. I would prefer not being referred to by name or identifying description in the publication of this study.

Yes: 1 No: 9 (Education)
Yes: 4 No: 2 (Literature)
Yes: 3 No: 0 (Law)
Yes: 8 No: 11 (Total)

Analysis of the Findings

A response to the research question (*Should the Bible be taught as a literary classic in public education?*) required that three other questions first be addressed: (1) What are the qualifications of a literary classic? (2) Is the Bible a literary classic? (3) Even if the Bible is a literary classic, does it necessarily follow that it should be taught in public schools? In this essay these three questions are considered as prerequisites to the presentation of a response to the research question.

What are the qualifications of a literary classic?

There is an old saw that if you ask ten experts you will get eleven opinions. Contrary to that adage, the literary experts in this study show remarkable convergence. They substantially agree on the characteristics of a literary classic as well as concurring with the description provided in *Abrams' Glossary of Literary Terms* (1993). Abrams characterizes a classic as a text that is kept in print, discussed frequently by scholars, and is likely to be included in anthologies and college courses. This characterization is demonstratively compatible with the descriptions offered by the literary scholars in this study. From the data, a composite description of a literary classic is: *a written work that has acquired and sustained the attention of literary scholars and has a wide audience in at least one culture. This attention is favorable owing to the work's aesthetic appeal and/or significant message. The duration of this attention cannot be precisely quantified, but it must be substantial.* (As one participant commented: "There are no instant classics.")

Is the Bible a literary classic?

Baseball sportswriters annually deliberate and vote on a slate of candidates for induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame. It is rare when a player receives a unanimous vote for this honor. The criteria for enshrinement in the Hall of Fame are ambiguous, leaving the sportswriters to exercise considerable subjectivity in their evaluations. Similarly, literary scholars employ criteria for classics that are susceptible to multiple interpretations. For this reason it is noteworthy that all of the literary scholars in this study assessed the Bible as a classic. Further, the legal and educational scholars were almost unanimous in assigning to the Bible literary classic status. Only one of them, an educator, disagreed with this designation. This solidarity is not surprising when the Bible is held in juxtaposition to the composite definition of a literary classic constructed from the surveys. The Bible is a literary work that has been kept in print since printing began in the fifteenth century and has maintained the attention of audiences in a multiplicity of cultures.

In the *New Testament* the Bible describes itself with the following statement: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16, NIV). One does not have to believe that the Bible is divinely inspired and authoritative in matters of faith and morals in order to accept it as a literary classic. The Bible can be read academically as well as devotionally, as Justice Clark wrote in *Abingdon v. Schempp* (1963). It is logical to conclude that anyone who maintains that the Bible is *not* a classic has a definition of literary classic that is at variance with this study's composite definition.

Even if the Bible is a literary classic, does it necessarily follow that it should be taught in public education?

Selectivity is a part of curriculum construction. In fact, the process of choosing some material in preference to other material is intrinsic to building a course of study. University professors and, to a lesser degree, public educators exercise academic freedom in determining what and how to teach. This freedom is not exercised arbitrarily. Syllabi and curricula express educational agendas. An academic can affirm that the Bible is a literary classic without being compelled to include it in a course.

One respondent in this study wrote, “A person cannot be well educated without some familiarity with the Bible.” That statement might seem agreeable to many, but not to educator and author Alfie Kohn who asked, “Is it even possible to agree on a *single definition* of what every high school student should know or be able to do in order to be considered well educated” (2004, p. 3)? It is interesting that in the same essay he confesses, “I could embarrass myself pretty quickly by listing the number of classic works of literature I’ve never read” (2004, p. 2). It will not suffice to argue for the Bible’s place in any curriculum by insisting that a person cannot be considered well educated without being conversant with the Bible. By logical extension, that argument would define innumerable people in many cultures as not well educated.

The Bible’s appropriateness for a specific course should be determined by that course’s stated learning outcomes. If the Bible is offered as an elective course then the propriety of that elective should be determined by its contribution to the stated objectives of the curriculum of which it is a part.

Conclusion

Influenced by the data, my answer to the research question is a *qualified yes*. Only two of the contributors agreed with the statement: *The Bible is in the category of literary classics that should not be taught in public education*. One of these two respondents is a school superintendent who does not believe that the Bible is a classic. The other is a literature professor who evaluated the Bible as a classic but wrote, “Yes, (the Bible should not be taught) given the current climate in which it would not likely be taught as mere narrative but as the only true narrative.”

There were expressions of prohibitive conditions among the participants who responded that it is acceptable for the Bible to be taught in public schools. The qualifications they expressed related to teachers rather than the Biblical material. One of the respondents commented that a teacher who would proselytize using the Bible should not teach the Bible. Another of the participants asked rhetorically, “Should a teacher who would proselytize for any cause be allowed to teach at all?”

The statement: *Theological books that religions have embraced as sacred cannot be taught as mere literature*, implies a second prohibitive condition. Eighteen of the nineteen respondents expressed the belief that the Bible can be taught academically rather than devotionally. As with proselytizing, the prohibitive condition in this case is related to the teacher rather than the material. A literary demonstration that the Bible can be taught exclusively as literature is the book, *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth* (Fee and Stuart, 1981). Co-authored by two evangelical scholars, this book provides instruction on how to understand the Bible in terms of its eight literary genres: apocalyptic literature, epistles, forensic language, gospels, historical narrative, parables, poetry, and wisdom literature. This book has exceeded 400,000 copies in print and remains in use nearly twenty-five years after its introduction.

In summary, the data have emboldened me to make the following seven statements in response to the research question.

1. The Bible meets the criteria for a literary classic.
2. The Bible can be taught as literature, making it available for use in public education.
3. Since it is not possible to teach all literary classics in the span of elementary and secondary education, it is not imperative that the Bible be included in a public school’s curricula.

4. Given the frequency with which Biblical material is cited or implied in written and spoken discourse in this culture, educators should give serious consideration to the inclusion of some form of Biblical instruction.
5. Even if the Bible is not part of a curriculum, teachers should be at liberty to explain Biblical references when they appear in the course of studying other material.
6. There is no legal prohibition to the inclusion of the Bible in public education *unless* it is taught either devotionally or as a means to proselytizing.
7. It is not necessary that a person be familiar with the Bible in order to be considered well educated. The basis for this assertion is the ambiguity of what it means to be well educated (Kohn, 2004).

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