

Toward a Jews' Self-Inventory for Bible Readers

A DRAFT effort, from #ExploringBabylon at songeveryday.org
based on Christian bible readers' self-inventories

This DRAFT is based – sometimes closely, more often loosely – on inventories in the *People's Companion to the Bible* and in N.K. Gottwald's “Framing Biblical Interpretation at New York Theological Seminary: A Student Self-Inventory on Biblical Hermeneutics.” These inventories were designed explicitly for Christians, more specifically for seminary students, but can profitably be employed by those outside the original audience. Both are widely available (links below).

As Neil Elliott's introduction to the *People's Companion to the Bible* explains, however, Jewish approaches to sacred text differ substantially from common Christian methods:

That is, while the Hermenia [Christian Bible commentary] page is designed to focus attention on the most accurate determination of “the meaning” of the text that a single scholar can provide, the Rabbinic Bible is designed to draw on a variety of voices interpreting a single text. (p.xxviii)

With this in mind, along with substantial differences in the dynamics of Jewish and Christian religious communities, I offer a draft self-inventory for Jewish readers of the Bible. Comments and suggestions from those willing to test-drive this inventory are most welcome.

Here, to begin, are two important notes from the original inventories:

The ‘correct’ answers are those that uncover as precisely as possible the mix of influences that have brought you to where you now are in your biblical understanding.
– Gottwald

Readers who enjoy certain privileges in society—because of wealth, education, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other factors—may find themselves thinking that these factors “don’t matter” for them as much as they might for others. If a question seems unimportant or irrelevant, one might well ask *why*?
– Elliott

Gottwald, N.K. “Framing Biblical Interpretation at New York Theological Seminary: A Student Self-Inventory on Biblical Hermeneutics.” *Reading from This Place, Vol. 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*. Ed. F. F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995. 256-261. (On-line source: <http://bit.ly/GottwaldInv>)

“A Self-Inventory for Bible Readers.” *Peoples' Companion to the Bible*. DeYoung, Gafney, et al., eds. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010, xxix-xxxii. (Related resources and link to download “Introduction,” which includes the self-inventory, at <http://fortresspress.com/product/peoples-companion-bible>)

D R A F T – Jews' Self-Inventory for Bible Readers – D R A F T

visit <http://songeveryday.org>

for more information and to share comments, suggestions

1) Customary Exposures

How do you usually encounter the Bible, if at all, today?

Through the Torah and Haftarah [weekly prophetic] readings, and any related commentary, during services? Through weekly commentaries/*dvrei torah* [words of Torah]? Group study, in- or outside of religious services, on the weekly Torah and Haftarah?

Do you recite or study psalms through the prayerbook? outside the prayerbook? Do you study from other Writings or the Prophets?

Do you encounter Bible through other Jewish studies? Is any of your exposure interfaith or through another faith community? What sorts of general media – movies, novels, podcasts, visual arts, etc. – to which you are regularly exposed include views of the Bible?

2) Intellectual, Spiritual, Ethical Resource

A) When was the last time you encountered a biblical passage or phrase that captured your attention and imagination? Has any Torah commentary you've encountered lately surprised, delighted, or angered you? Are powerful responses to Bible and its interpretation regular or rare occurrences for you? Is intellectual stimulation a regular feature, or a goal, of your typical exposures to Bible?

B) Do you consider the Torah, the Psalms, or any other part of the Bible a regular source of spiritual awareness and practice? Is this a regular feature of the way Bible is taught in your religious community (or communities), if any?

C) Do you glean ethical lessons from your encounters with Torah, in whatever format? Is this goal a regular feature of Torah-learning of any Jewish study or worship in which you participate? Do you consider Bible central, or ancillary, to your ethical practice?

Do paragraphs (A) and (B) and (C) appear to address separate realms of experience for you?

3) Text and Media Resources

When you read the Bible, do you read in Hebrew? In English or another language? Which translation(s) do you use? Why?

Do you regularly consult additional bible resources in print or on-line? Do you favor particular genres of commentary: historical explorations? contemporary ethical applications? personal spiritual connections? other approaches? Do your sources generally reflect one denomination -- maybe a congregational library -- or a particular viewpoint? A variety of views?

How does general media and popular culture influence your views of the Bible?

D R A F T – Jews' Self-Inventory for Bible Readers, p.2 – D R A F T
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4) Religious Community and Standards

Do you participate in a religious community or identify with a movement in Judaism? Describe some of the ways sacred text is understood in that community (or communities).

How does your community understand “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua...and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly” (Avot 1:1)? How do you understand it? Do other views of the Bible's reception and authority influence your reading?

What kinds of interpretation does your community generally favor? Literary, linguistic, mystical, narrative- or character-focused? Is the focus on ancient teaching? Contemporary? A mix? Are particular experts regularly cited? Do specific living leaders have a strong influence on the way your community views sacred text? Are there leaders from past generations who have a strong influence on your community's approach to Torah?

Do you find yourself challenging or supporting your community's accepted views of interpretation and the values prioritized?

5) Personal and Family Background

Were you raised in a religious tradition? Are you affiliated now? Has your affiliation changed over the years?

What, if anything, were you taught about Torah and Tanakh in your childhood home? Do your views now differ from what you learned in childhood? Are there differences within your family regarding sacred text? If so, how do you feel about that?

6) Gender and Sexual Orientation

Is your gender named in the Torah? Is gender a factor in the degree to which you feel the biblical text addresses you, regarding covenant and commandments? Does gender influence the ways you identify, or don't, with biblical characters? How does gender, overall, influence your Bible reading?

Is your sexual orientation the norm in the Bible? Does your religious community interpret the Bible in heteronormative ways? Is a more inclusive view an explicit concern? How does your own sexual orientation, and your community's attitudes, influence your reading of Bible?

6) Ethnicity and/or race

How do you identify yourself racially and ethnically? In what ways are you in a minority or in a less privileged position, in- or outside your religious community, in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture? In what ways are you in a majority or more privileged? What role does this status play in your Bible reading? In what other ways does race, ethnicity, or culture influence the way you encounter the Bible?

D R A F T – Jews' Self-Inventory for Bible Readers, p.3 – D R A F T
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7) Economic/Social Class

How do you define yourself in terms of class?

Writers of the inventories cited above note that U.S. culture tends to deny the existence of class, complicating this question. They suggest considering some of these factors – in terms of yourself, previous generations, your neighborhood, and your congregation, if you have one – in exploring this question: work experience, education and career expectations, income, inherited wealth, reading material and news sources consulted.

8) Personal and Communal Politics

How do your own politics, in the widest sense, influence how you read the Bible? How do your views of Jewish peoplehood and the modern nation of Israel affect your reading? Do your personal views jibe with those of the religious community (or communities) in which you participate?

Do you and/or your religious community publicly support particular values that affect Bible reading: gender, housing, responsibility toward other Jews, or racial justice issues, for example?

10) Learning/Ranking, Next Steps

Are there factors not raised as you addressed the questions above that influence your reading of the Bible? Of the factors raised, which are most important to you? Which might be called foundational or possibly non-negotiable for you? Rank some of most important factors.

What did you learn about yourself and the communities in which you participate? Did anything surprise you?

Are there any aspects of how you relate to Bible that you'd like to explore further? Any that you'd like to change? How?

Post Script: After you've ranked important factors influencing your Bible reading, and practiced making those factors transparent for yourself, consider sharing them, where appropriate, with others, as you read and interpret – while lighting Chanukah candles, at the Seder table, over Shabbat.... After a time, revisit this inventory to see what, if anything, has changed.