

I.
SETTING THE CONTEXT -
The Academic Study of
Sacred Texts and Commentaries

Lesson 1: Religious vs. Devotional Study of
Religious Texts

Lesson 2: The Bible as a Primary Source Document
for Learning about the Ancient Hebrews

Lesson 1:

Religious vs. Devotional Study of Religious Texts

It is impossible to study history without encountering religion, not as a simple by-product of human culture, but as a major factor in shaping behavior and influencing the trajectory of major events. World History is anemic and often incomprehensible without the study of the major world religions, and the academic content standards in History/Social Sciences in many states require it. However, the teacher *and* the students (and their parents) must be clear that “teaching religion” and “teaching *about* religion” are two very different things.

The PowerPoint presentation used in this lesson¹ makes clear the distinctions between devotional study and academic study of religious texts. It is best used at the beginning of the year, and referred back to as needed.

Objectives:

- Students will understand that the way in which they study religion in school is very different from the way they might learn about their own particular religion at home, in places of worship or in religious school.
- Students will be able to articulate some of the key differences between academic and devotional study of religious texts.

Materials: The PowerPoint presentation that accompanies this lesson. (Outline attached.)

<u>Vocabulary:</u>	devotional	sacred
	confessional	sectarian
	premise	divine/divinely
	experiential	accessible
	practitioners	neutral
	attribution	

Procedure:

1. Explain to students that while studying history, they will also be learning about different religions and their influence on past events. Before beginning that study, it is important to understand what it means to learn *about* religion in an academic context.
2. Have students draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper. Label one column “Religious” and the other “Academic.” Starting with slide 3, they should write down two to three key words or phrases from each slide in the corresponding column.
3. Show the PowerPoint presentation, clarifying vocabulary as needed. Note: The last two slides are intended for use in presentations to teachers and other adults. They can be used with students

¹ The PowerPoint presentation was developed by Professor Rebecca Moore, Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at San Diego State University

at the teacher's discretion, explaining that they describe the approach your students should expect from you.

4. Pair students and have them quickly share with each other what they have written in each column. Using two or more of the words/phrases they have recorded, they should construct a single sentence that contrasts one aspect of the academic and devotional study of religion.

5. Have students share their sentences. Alternatively, have them post their sentences on a classroom or electronic bulletin board.

For PowerPoint Preview, see next page.

[To download the power point presentation – Click here](#)

Academic vs Devotional Study of Religious Texts

by
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There is a
difference
between the
academic or
scholarly study of
religion and
sacred texts
(Religious
Studies)...



...and the
devotional
study of
religion and
sacred texts
(confessional,
sectarian)



What is the difference between religious studies and devotional studies?

They start from different premises
They ask different questions
They use different vocabulary

Different Premises : Religious Studies

Religion and its texts are products of culture
Religion can be investigated like any other
subject e.g. nature, history, psychology
Religion can be understood comparatively by
outsiders and non-believers
Religious texts have human authors whose
motives and historical contexts can be
studied

Different Premises : Devotional Study

Religion is divinely given
Religious texts have human authors who have
been divinely inspired and cannot be
questioned
Religious texts are understood through
experiential knowing, not necessarily
accessible to outsiders
Religion can only truly be understood by its
practitioners

Different Questions : Religious Studies
(especially about sacred texts)

What is the historical context?
Who wrote the text and why?
Which text is oldest, most accurate?
How did original readers understand the text?
Who tends to participate in the religion?
What are its beliefs and practices?

Different Questions : Devotional Study

What does my religion say about the divine plan for my life?
What does it say about my destiny?
What does it say about how should I live?
What does my religion say I should believe?
How do I know if my beliefs are true?

Different Vocabulary : Religious Studies

Scholars use neutral language
They use descriptive language
They use a technical language
They avoid "we-they" language
They provide attribution to scholarly sources and primary texts

Different Vocabulary : Devotional Study

Believers use confessional language
They speak in the first-person
They discuss religion as insiders
They provide attribution to a sacred authority
They tend not to question the text or its interpretation

Religious Studies teaches **what** people believe

Devotional study teaches what people **should** believe (or what the faith teaches)



Four principles of Religious Studies

1. De-familiarize : use scholarly and neutral language
2. Historicize : put subject into its historical context
3. Analyze : compare similarities and differences between texts
4. Exemplify : Model behavior that indicates critical thinking skills



Remember!

While teaching about religion presents unique challenges it's best to treat it like other academic subjects, modeling appropriate behavior and attitudes

Lesson 2:

The Bible as a Primary Source Document for Learning About the Ancient Hebrews²

By examining passages from the Bible for information about the culture of the ancient Hebrew people, students gain a clear understanding of what “academic” study of religious texts is like.

Prior Knowledge: Students should know who the ancient Hebrews were. They should know that the Bible recounts the ancient history, laws, and beliefs of the Jewish people. They should be familiar with the names of the five books, and the technique of citation – i.e., Book, Chapter, Verse.

Objectives:

- Students will experience one technique for studying religious texts from an academic perspective.
- Students will use selected passages from the Bible to extract and interpret information to draw conclusions about ancient Hebrew life.

Materials:

1. Card sets: Use different colors of paper for card sets A and B. Make enough sets of A for $\frac{1}{4}$ of your class, and enough of B for $\frac{1}{4}$ of the class. Combined, there should be 1 card set for every two students in your class, divided equally in two different colors.
2. Enough worksheets for each pair of students, plus each group of four students.
3. One vocabulary sheet for each pair of students.

Procedure:

1. Introduction: Explain to the class that the Bible is a guide to faith for Jews, Christians and Muslims, and is used in devotional study by practitioners of each of those faiths to gain religious insight. When approached from an academic, rather than devotional, perspective, the Bible is also an important source of information about history. Combined with archaeological discoveries, it can be used to learn about ancient Hebrew life and culture.

While we can't use the Bible to *scientifically prove* that the specific people in the stories really lived and did the things told, we can use the Bible to provide information about the way of life of people living in that region at about the same time as when the stories are set.

We are going to search for as many “facts” as we can find about the lifestyle of the ancient Hebrews, using excerpts from the first five books of the Bible (called the Torah by Jewish people.)

2. Have students work in pairs. Give each pair a set of cards, a worksheet and a vocabulary page. Half the class should have cards from A and half from B. The vocabulary words are referenced by number on the cards.

² Adapted from a lesson by Margaret Hill based on material from the Skirball Museum at Hebrew Union College. Hill's lesson is available at: http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/score_lessons/torah_tells/index.html

Instructions: You and your partner have a set of cards with quotes from the Torah. The references at the bottom of the cards indicate the name of the book (e.g., Genesis), the chapter and the verse number where you can find the quote. Use the vocabulary page to help you with words you don't understand. Working with your partner, read the text on each of your cards, and use the worksheet to record the information.

3. Create groups of four by combining two pairs that share the same set of cards. Give these groups a new worksheet. Instruct them to compare their answers, discuss and resolve any disagreements, and fill out the new worksheet based on common agreement.
4. As a whole class, go over the worksheets, and record the answers on the board. Since there are two sets of cards with different quotations, the final compilation will be a combination of the information contained in each set. Check student answers against the Teacher Answer Key.
5. Discuss: What have we been able to learn about the lifestyle of the ancient Hebrews from these quotes? Point out that the quotes used do not cover everything we could learn about the lifestyle of the ancient Hebrews from reading the entire Torah. And if we were to examine other books of the Bible (e.g., Kings, the Prophets) we could learn even more.
6. Have each student write one or two paragraphs summarizing what they have learned about life among the ancient Hebrews. If they wish, they may illustrate their writing.

Quotations are drawn from the *Tanakh - New JPS English Translation*.

CARD SET A.

<p>Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ismalites coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum, balm¹, and labdanum² to be taken to Egypt.</p> <p>Genesis 37:25</p>	<p>He made all the utensil of the later – the pails, the scrapers, the basins, the flesh hooks, and the fire pans; he made all these utensils with copper...</p> <p>Exodus 38:3</p>
<p>Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick, three <i>seahs</i>³ of choice flour! Knead and make cakes!"</p> <p>Genesis 18:6</p>	<p>You shall not make false measures of length, weight or capacity⁴. You shall have an honest balance.</p> <p>Leviticus 19:35-36</p>
<p>A single witness may not validate⁵ against a person any guilt or blame for any offense that may be committed; a case can be valid only on the testimony of two witnesses or more.... and the magistrates⁶ shall make a thorough investigation.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 19:15; 18</p>	<p>If a fellow Hebrew, man or woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years and in the seventh you shall set him free. When you set him free, do not let him go empty handed. Furnish him out of the flock, threshing floor and vat⁷.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 15:12-14</p>
<p>What food you eat you shall procure from them for money; even the water you drink you shall procure from them with money.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 2:6</p>	<p>The Lord your God is bringing you into a good land... a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 8:7-8</p>
<p>.... he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them. " ...If it please you, do not go on past... bath your feet and recline under the tree..." Then Abraham... took a calf, tender and choice, and gave it to a servant-boy, who hastened to prepare it. He took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them...</p> <p>Genesis 18:4-8</p>	<p>Though you take much seed out to the field, you shall gather in little, for the locust shall consume it. Though you plant vineyards and till them, you shall have no wine to drink or store, for the worm shall devour them... The cricket shall take over all the trees and produce of your land.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 28:38-42</p>

CARD SET B.

<p>And they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they encamped there beside the water.</p> <p>Exodus 15:27</p>	<p>You shall appoint magistrates⁸ and officials for your tribes... and they shall govern the people with due justice.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 16:8</p>
<p>Now Abram was very rich in cattle, silver and gold.</p> <p>Genesis 13:2</p>	<p>You shall not judge unfairly... you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning⁹ and upset the plea of the just.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 16:8</p>
<p>Jacob arrived safe in the city... and he encamped before the city. The parcel of land where he pitched his tent he purchased from the children of Hamor, Schechem's father, for a hundred <i>kesitahs</i>¹⁰.</p> <p>Genesis 33:18-19</p>	<p>Let there be sworn treaty between our two parties, between you and us. Let us make a pact with you that you will do us no harm, just as we have not molested you but have always dealt kindly with you and sent you away in peace.</p> <p>Genesis 26:28-29</p>
<p>.... he selected from what was at hand these presents for his brother Esau: 200 she-goats and 20 he-goats; 200 ewes and 20 rams; 30 milch¹¹ camels and their colts; 40 cows and 10 bulls; 20 she-asses and 10 he-asses.</p> <p>Genesis 32:15</p>	<p>When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field... you shall not pick your vineyard bare or gather the fallen fruit in your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger.</p> <p>Leviticus 19:9-10</p>
<p>When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let him go free on account of the eye.</p> <p>Exodus 21:26</p>	<p>You shall make a screen for the entrance to the tent, of blue, purple, and red yarns, and fine twisted linen, done in embroidery.</p> <p>Exodus 26:36</p>

Clues to the Life of the Ancient Hebrews

The Torah (the first five books of the Bible) gives us clues about how the ancient Hebrews lived before they settled in Palestine. Working with your partner(s), use the quotations on the cards to answer the following questions. Write down the source (citation at bottom of the card) for your answers.

Note: You may not be able to answer all of the questions using the clues you have. Record the *facts* that are actually provided in your quotes. If you *think* that something might be true based on what you read, write it on the *back* of the sheet under the heading: Maybe, and say why you think this might be true.

1. What can you say about the economy of the ancient Hebrews?
 - How did they make a living?
 - What kinds of foods did the ancient Hebrews eat? How did they get their food?
 - What kinds of animals did they have? What did they use them for?
 - What kinds of things did they make, and what did they use to make them?
 - Did they buy, sell or trade things? What? Were there any rules about selling things?
 - Were there differences in wealth (how much people had)? How do you know?
2. Where did people live? What did they live in?
3. Can you say anything about the geography of the land? What kinds of natural resources were important? What aspects of nature might make life difficult?
4. What can you say about courts of law? How did someone get to be a judge? Were there any rules that judges had to follow?
5. Did the ancient Hebrews own slaves? Could they do whatever they wanted with their slaves? How do you know?
6. What was one way the ancient Hebrews gave *Tzedakah* (help to the poor)?
7. Is there anything else you can say about how the ancient Hebrews related to one another or to people from other groups?

Clues to the Life of the Ancient Hebrews

1. What can you say about the economy of the ancient Hebrews?

- How did they make a living? *farming; herding; maybe: as craftsmen (e.g., working copper); as merchants*
- What kinds of foods did the ancient Hebrews eat? *meat; milk; wheat, barley, figs, pomegranates, olive oil, honey, wine, cakes made from flour*

How did they get their food? *they raised livestock, farmed, bought food with money*

- What kinds of animals did they have? What did they use them for? *goats, sheep (ewes and rams), camels, cows, asses (donkeys); they used cows and camels for milk; cows to eat; camels for transportation and carrying things maybe: goats for meat and milk; sheep for wool and meat; asses for transportation.*
- What kinds of things did they make, and what did they use to make them? *cooking utensils from copper; wine; cakes from flour; yarns; linen cloth; screens*
- Did they buy, sell or trade things? What? *food, water, land, slaves, gum, balm, labdanum*

Were there any rules about selling things? *you couldn't cheat people with false measures (weights, rulers, etc.); you had to let slaves go free after six years.*

- Were there differences in wealth (how much people had)? How do you know? *Yes. Abraham was rich with cattle, gold and silver; the rule that you had to leave some of the harvest for the poor; there were slaves and slave-owners.*

2. Where did people live? What did they live in? *some people lived in cities; tents maybe: houses because some lived in cities.*

3. Can you say anything about the geography of the land? What kinds of natural resources were important? *it was a mild climate (palm trees); water was important (people would sometimes pay for it); there was good farm land*

What aspects of nature might make life difficult? *farmers could have a hard time with insects*

4. What can we tell about the courts of law? How did someone get to be a judge? *judges were appointed*

Were there any rules that judges had to follow? *they couldn't take bribes; there had to be at least two witnesses to judge someone guilty*

5. Did the ancient Hebrews own slaves? Yes.

Could they do whatever they wanted with their slaves? How do you know? *No. If they seriously hurt a slave (e.g., blinded him) they had to let him go free; they had to let slaves go free after six years.*

6. What were some ways the ancient Hebrews gave *Tzedakah* (help to the poor)? *they left fruit and grain in their fields for the poor; when they set slaves free they gave them animals, flour and wine*

7. Is there anything else you can say about how the ancient Hebrews related to one another or to people from other groups? *groups would make peace treaties to avoid conflict*
maybe: they were nice to strangers (left food in the fields for them); they were generous (gave gifts, served food to visitors); men gave the orders;

VOCABULARY

¹ balm – fragrant resin or leaves from evergreen trees

² labdanum – a resin made from rock roses used in making perfumes

³ seahs – a unit of measure or weight

⁴ capacity - volume

⁵ validate - be enough to back up a claim

⁶ magistrates - judges

⁷ vat – for wine storage

⁸ magistrates - judges

⁹ discerning - perceptive

¹⁰ kesitahs – a unit of money

¹¹ milch – milk