

Do Biblical Scholars Make Ideal Nomadologists?

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I would like to thank Dr. Breed for writing the lead essay for this issue of @ *This Point* and for the opportunity to respond to it. The lead essay reviews the landscape of biblical studies and offers a proposal for how biblical scholars might conceptualize what they are doing when they do biblical scholarship.

Informed by the work of Paul Ricoeur, Breed explains the current state of biblical studies by outlining three areas of scholarly inquiry and the subjective criteria that maintain the artificial boundaries between these areas. These areas of inquiry, labeled as the world behind the text, the world in the text, and the world in front of the text, describe various types of research interests that tend to preoccupy biblical scholars. Using examples from Second Temple literature, Breed explains well the methodological difficulties with scholarly notions of an original text or context in relation to biblical literature-- notions which represent a traditional preoccupation of many biblical scholars. Breed concludes with his own proposal for how biblical scholars could “re-imagine” their discipline as the work of “a group of nomadologists.” As nomadologists, biblical scholars are textualists, to use Breed’s term, who study biblical literature “wherever it goes, from the ancient Near East to the present day” to ask what biblical texts can do and to understand how they function in a variety of circumstances. In this sense, Breed’s essay considers how biblical scholars might think about their field in the years to come.

Breed's essay shows that an original context for a biblical text is not the same as its ancient context(s). In his brief discussion of feminist biblical scholarship, he explains that a scholar can address ancient historical contexts even if her or his questions do not focus on identifying an original text. Ancient contexts can inform a variety of scholarly questions that do not reflect the traditional preoccupations of the field. This holds true for recent critical studies of disability in biblical literature as well as other areas of inquiry that are, fairly or unfairly, often contrasted with historical studies.

Breed uses several examples of textual and editorial differences and compositional and redactional histories from Sumer through Second Temple literature to question the notion of original texts and contexts. To make this argument, one needs to have some facility with ancient texts and contexts. In other words, the lead essay depends on its author's graduate training in the study of ancient texts and contexts. However else one defines a biblical scholar (the lead essay assumes but does not provide a working definition of the term), graduate training in some aspect(s) of the study of ancient texts or contexts is usually assumed.

This raises the question of whether biblical scholars would make ideal nomadologists in regard to biblical texts. Biblical scholars are not the only ones who engage biblical literature within academia. In fact, the work of literary scholar Robert Alter has tremendously influenced the approaches of biblical scholars to the study of biblical narrative and the world in the text;¹ the anthropologist Mary Douglas's study of Pentateuchal dietary regulations has greatly informed biblical scholars' understandings of ritual;² and sociologist Nancy Jay has had an impact on the

¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

² Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, 2002.

study of sacrifice within biblical studies.³ Scholars working in other disciplines have contributed much of what biblical scholars somewhat misleadingly cite as womanist biblical scholarship.⁴ Breed's engagement in his main text with scholars such as Paul Ricoeur or Hans Frei provides further examples of this phenomenon.

Considering that a nomadologist would study the text wherever it goes, colleagues in other disciplines may be better equipped than are their counterparts in biblical studies to understand what biblical literature can do in many, if not most, contexts or places that the text will go (or, more accurately, places where people have taken them). I work in a large, non-confessional, public research university in which the Department of Religion is housed within the College of Liberal Arts. I have colleagues in English, Art History, History, American Studies, and other programs in the humanities whose research involves biblical literature in non-ancient contexts. I imagine that many, if not most, U.S. seminaries and divinity schools include faculty in constructive and practical theology, Church history, homiletics, and other disciplines in religious studies whose work engages biblical texts in a variety of circumstances. If nomadology involves studying the text's nomadic travels "from the ancient Near East to the present day," one should acknowledge that the vast majority of contexts for uses of biblical literature are not ancient.

Rather than re-imagine themselves as "a group of nomadologists," Breed's proposal may actually require biblical scholars to consider who they want to engage as conversation partners and to recognize that they make up a relatively small portion of a larger contingent of academics

³ Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁴ Nyasha Junior, "Womanist Biblical Interpretation." Pages 37-46 in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katherine Doob Sakenfeld*. Edited by Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006;

from across religious studies, the broader humanities, and the social sciences who presently study what biblical texts do in a variety of contexts. Academics already study biblical literature wherever it goes; it is just that many of them are not biblical scholars. If, as the lead essay argues, there is no inherent reason why one should privilege the Bible's ancient contexts above its other contexts, we should also not privilege the place of biblical scholars in a more comprehensive study of biblical literature as nomadic texts.

To me, the success of lead essay's proposal would not depend on re-imagining who we are as biblical scholars as much as on coming to terms with what we actually contribute to the academic study of uses of the Bible that is already happening. A claim that biblical scholars would be well qualified to be nomadologists reflects academic privilege more so than academic credentials or areas of expertise. Assembling a group of nomadologists to study uses of biblical literature would be a multi-disciplinary endeavor for which biblical scholars would not necessarily be qualified to define or direct if our area of inquiry is no longer privileged. In this sense, the proposal in the lead essay does not require biblical scholars to reconsider our own academic identity. It still assumes that biblical scholars have some specialized background in ancient texts or contexts. Thus, biblical scholars can make a valuable contribution to a more comprehensive understanding of biblical contexts. Yet, they should not imagine themselves as a group at all qualified to provide this comprehensive understanding on their own.

The lead essay's proposal raises questions about who biblical scholars want to engage as conversation partners in order to facilitate rigorous study of biblical literature in most of its contexts. In regard to the conversation partners that we chose to engage, as far as I could tell, all of references in the lead essay are to works by scholars of European/Caucasian descent with only men mentioned in the main text. These conversation partners represent well the membership of

the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), the leading professional organization for biblical scholars. A 2014 Member Profile Report indicated that almost 89% of participants identify as of European/Caucasian descent and 76% identify as male (seen [here](#)). The membership of the SBL, however, does not reflect the vast majority of people from past or present social locations who have put biblical literature to various uses. This may further contribute to why most groups of biblical scholars would not make an ideal group of nomadologists. An ideal group would require a much broader set of conversation partners.

Biblical scholars' expertise with ancient texts and contexts can make an important and necessary but still very limited contribution to the type of project described above. Given the limits of biblical scholarship in terms of its specializations and its gender and ethnic representation, the study of biblical literature as nomadic texts requires intentionality about one's conversation partners and a willingness to accept that a biblical scholar's contribution may not be privileged among a group of nomadologists. Once again, I would like to thank Dr. Breed for his thought-provoking essay and for the opportunity to serve as a constructive conversation partner.