



Bible Literacy Report II

WHAT UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS SAY
INCOMING STUDENTS NEED TO KNOW

Commissioned by Bible Literacy Project, Inc. under a grant from the John Templeton Foundation

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INCOMING STUDENTS NEED TO KNOW

A qualitative survey of English professors by
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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, investigates what English professors at leading universities believe incoming students should know about the Bible. It accompanies the Bible Literacy Project's April 2005 *Bible Literacy Report: What do American teens need to know and what do they know?*, which included: 1) a qualitative research project on what leading high school English teachers believe their students need to know about the Bible, and 2) an analysis of a nationally representative survey by The Gallup Organization on what American teens currently know about the Bible and other religious literature of the world. The conclusions reached in this report do not necessarily represent the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

ABOUT THE IMAGES USED IN THIS REPORT: The images in this report represent some of the authors named by English professors in this study whose works require knowledge of the Bible on the part of the reader. The cover depicts the following authors, beginning in the top left corner and proceeding clockwise: Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, Emily Dickinson, Ernest Hemingway, Toni Morrison, William Shakespeare, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Joseph Conrad.

ABOUT DR. MARIE WACHLIN: Marie Goughnour Wachlin, Ph.D., a former public high school English teacher in Oregon, is currently Adjunct Professor at Concordia University College of Education at Portland, Oregon. Her academic essays include "The Bible—A Classic in a Class by Itself," *English Journal* (February 1998) and "The Place of Bible Literature in Public High School English Classes," *Research in the Teaching of English* (February 1997). She also authored "What do high school teachers think students need to know about the Bible?" in *Bible Literacy Report: What do American teens need to know and what do they know?* (April 2005).

ABOUT DR. BYRON R. JOHNSON: Byron Johnson, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for Religious Inquiry Across the Disciplines (CRIAD) as well as Director of the National Domestic Violence Fatality Review Initiative, both at Baylor University. He is a Senior Fellow at the Witherspoon Institute in Princeton, New Jersey.

ABOUT THE BIBLE LITERACY PROJECT: The Bible Literacy Project is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to research and public education on the academic study of the Bible in public and private schools. In 1999 it co-published a consensus statement with the First Amendment Center, "The Bible & Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide." In September 2005, it published the first high school Bible textbook for public schools in the last 30 years, *The Bible and Its Influence*. For more information visit www.bibleliteracy.org.

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CONTENTS

v	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
vi	UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS IN THE STUDY
viii	LITERATURE MENTIONED
2	INTRODUCTION/METHODOLOGY
5	FINDINGS
45	CONCLUSIONS
46	RECOMMENDATIONS/SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY
47	REFERENCES
48	APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
49	APPENDIX B: TABLES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What do today's college students need to know about the Bible to participate fully and equally in the courses taught in America's elite colleges and universities? This study surveyed 39 English professors at 34 top U.S. colleges and universities to learn their assessment of how important Bible literacy is to college-level study of English and American literature. What do incoming freshmen in college-level English courses need to know about the Bible?

Almost without exception, English professors we surveyed at major American colleges and universities see knowledge of the Bible as a deeply important part of a good education. The virtual unanimity and depth of their responses on this question are striking. The Bible is not only a sacred scripture to millions of Americans, it is also arguably (as one Northwestern professor stated), the "most influential text in all of Western culture."

For example, when asked to respond to the question, "Regardless of a person's faith, an educated person needs to know about the Bible," no professor disagreed; nine provided additional explanation. When asked, "Some scholars say Western literature is steeped in references to the Bible. How would you respond to that?" 38 of 39 English professors agreed; 24 strongly. When asked, "In your opinion, how important is it for students who take your courses to be familiar with the Bible?" 38 of 39 professors said it was important.

Overwhelmingly, professors in this survey indicated that a lack of basic Bible literacy hampers students' ability to understand both classics and contemporary work. Arduously "decoding" scripture references detracts from absorbing and responding to great works of art, both ancient and modern.

At the same time, a number of professors expressed discomfort or reservations with appearing to "take sides" in favor of the Bible in the contemporary context. They did not wish to associate themselves with a political movement around the Bible, or to seem to detract from the importance of other aspects of a good education, including the value of becoming knowledgeable about other world religions.

This report concludes that high schools should make basic Bible knowledge part of their curriculum, especially for college preparatory students. Doing so requires developing a variety of educational materials and curricula that simultaneously (a) acknowledge the Bible's status as sacred scripture to millions of Americans, (b) are fair to students of all faith traditions, and (c) are of high academic quality.

Doing so will be an important part of meeting the next generation's educational needs in an increasingly diverse population.

UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS IN THE STUDY

Adele Berlin

Robert H. Smith Professor of Biblical Studies;
National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow;
State of Israel Prize of the Minister of Science,
Culture, and Sport for Classical Literature
University of Maryland

Gordon M. Braden

Linden Kent Memorial Professor; English
Department Chair; Roland H. Bainton Book Prize;
National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow
University of Virginia

Leslie Brisman

Karl Young Professor of English
Yale University

Gerald L. Bruns

The William P. and Hazel B. White Professor
and Chair of English; Guggenheim Fellow;
National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow
University of Notre Dame

Howell Chickering, Jr.

G. Armour Craig Professor of Language
and Literature
Amherst College

J. Scott Colley

College President; Professor of English,
Rhetoric, and Writing
Berry College

Stuart K. Culver

English Department Chair
University of Utah

Kevin Dunn

Dean of Academic Affairs for Arts and
Sciences College; English Professor
Tufts University

Richard J. Dunn

English Department Chair
University of Washington

Barbara L. Estrin

English Department Chair
Stonehill College

Janis D. Flint-Ferguson

English Department Chair
Gordon College

Edward A. Geary

English Department Chair
Brigham Young University

Ernest B. Gilman

Professor of English; Guggenheim Fellow
New York University

Warren Ginsberg

Chair and Distinguished Professor in English
University of Oregon

Wayne E. Glausser

English Department Chair;
Indiana Professor of the Year
DePauw University

Steven Goldsmith

Associate Professor of English
University of California at Berkeley

J. Dennis Huston

Professor of English
Rice University

David Scott Kastan

Old Dominion Foundation Professor in the
Humanities; Chair of English and Comparative
Literature; first American to serve as General Editor
of the Arden Shakespeare; Guggenheim Fellow
Columbia University

Robert Kiely

Donald P. and Katherine B. Loker
Professor of English
Harvard University

Ulrich Knoeflmacher

Paton Foundation Professor of Ancient and
Modern Literature
Princeton University

George P. Landow

Professor of English and the History of Art;
Fulbright Scholar; Guggenheim Fellow;
Fellow of the Cornell Society for the Humanities
Brown University

Ina Lipkowitz

Lecturer in Literature
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Christopher J. MacGowan

English Department Chair
The College of William and Mary

Pamela R. Matthews

Associate Professor and Associate Head of English
Texas A&M University

John Netland

English Department Chair
Calvin College

Barbara Newman

Professor of English and Religion;
Guggenheim Fellow; National Endowment
for the Humanities Fellow
Northwestern University

Linda H. Peterson

Neil Gray, Jr. Professor of English;
Director of Graduate Studies; English
Department Chair, 1994–2000
Yale University

Robert M. Polhemus

The Joseph S. Atha Professor in Humanities;
English Department Chair
Stanford University

Monica Brzezinski Potkay

Associate Professor of English
The College of William and Mary

Thomas P. Roche

Murray Professor of English, Emeritus
Princeton University

Leland Ryken

Clyde S. Kilby Professor of English
Wheaton College

Wayne Harvard Slater

Associate Professor and Coordinator of Secondary
Education, Language and English Education
University of Maryland

Hans Spalteholz

Professor of English and Religion, Emeritus
Concordia University at Portland, Oregon

Karen E. Swann

English Department Chair
Williams College

Martin G. Trammell

Chair of English and Communication;
Professor of Humanities
Corban College

Christina von Nolcken

Professor of English Language and Literature;
Associate English Chair for Undergraduate Studies
University of Chicago

Ralph Williams

Professor in the Department of English,
Language and Literature; “Best Professor” Michigan
Daily Newspaper Survey (nine of the last ten years);
Excellence in Education Teaching Award
University of Michigan

Susan Wood

Gladys Louise Fox Chair and Professor in English;
Best Book of Poetry Award, Texas Institute of Letters
Rice University

Jon Stanton Woodson

Professor of English; 2005–2006 Fulbright Scholar
to University of Pecs in Pecs, Hungary
Howard University

[ADDITIONAL RELATED COMMENTS FROM...](#)**Roger G. Baker**

Associate Professor of English; Lilly/AAR
Teaching Fellow, Fulbright Fellow
Brigham Young University

Paul A. Parrish

Regents Professor and English Department Head;
Executive Director, South Central Modern
Language Association
Texas A&M University

LITERATURE MENTIONED



SHUSAKU ENDO
1923 - 1996

Literature that professors specifically mentioned for which Bible literacy is advantageous. *The professors cited examples, not an exhaustive list.*

GENRES AND ERAS

1. Survey of English literature [1700 to the present]
2. Foundations of Western literature
3. American literature
4. British literature
5. Victorian literature [19th century]
6. Romantic Period [late 18th century Western Europe]
7. British Romanticism
8. Renaissance literature [after Dark Ages into 17th century]
9. English Renaissance literature
10. Middle English literature [1066 and the mid-to-late 15th century]
11. Medieval literature [500 AD to late 15th century]
12. Old English literature [Anglo-Saxon literature, mid-5th century to 1066]
13. Old English poetry—Beowulf
14. 21st century Western literature
15. 20th century American literature
16. 20th century British literature
17. 19th century fiction
18. 17th century literature
19. 17th century devotional lyric
20. 16th and 17th century English literature
21. 1600-1830 literature
22. Western civilization
23. Humanities
24. Poetry
25. Contemporary poetry
26. Modern poetry
27. Romantic poetry
28. Postmodernism
29. Fiction
30. English novel
31. Biography/autobiography
32. African-American literature
33. African-American poetry
34. Anglo-American nonfiction
35. Irish literature
36. Medieval Italian literature

WRITERS

1. Matthew Arnold
2. Wystan Hugh Auden
3. James Arthur Baldwin
4. Julian Barnes, including *History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*
5. Samuel Beckett: including *Waiting for Godot*
6. William Blake: including *The Book of Urizen*
7. Gwendolyn Brooks
8. Charlotte Brontë: including *Jane Eyre*

LITERATURE MENTIONED CONT.

9. Emily Brontë: including *Wuthering Heights*
10. Dan Brown
11. Elizabeth Barrett Browning
12. Robert Browning
13. John Bunyan
14. Lord Byron: including *Marino Faliero*
15. Cædmon
16. Thomas Carlyle: including *The Signs of the Times*
17. Geoffrey Chaucer: including *Canterbury Tales* "The Clerk's Tale," "Merchant's Tale," "Miller's Tale," "Pardoner's Tale," "Wife of Bath's Tale," "Yeoman's Tale"
18. Samuel Taylor Coleridge
19. Richard Crashaw
20. Dante Alighieri: including *The Divine Comedy, Inferno*
21. Daniel Defoe: including *Robinson Crusoe*
22. Charles John Huffam Dickens
23. Emily Dickinson
24. John Donne: including "Holy Sonnets: Death, be not proud"
25. John Dryden
26. George Eliot
27. T. S. Eliot: including "Journey of the Magi," *The Waste Land*
28. Ralph Waldo Emerson
29. Shusaku Endo
30. William Faulkner: including *Absalom, Absalom!*
31. Gustave Flaubert: including "A Simple Heart"
32. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: including *Faust*
33. Thomas Hardy: including "The Convergence of the Twain," "Mayor of Casterbridge"
34. Nathaniel Hawthorne
35. Ernest Hemingway: including *The Old Man and the Sea, The Sun Also Rises*
36. George Herbert
37. Gerard Manley Hopkins
38. Henry James: including *The Golden Bowl, The Wings of the Dove*
39. Leroi Jones: including *The Dutchman*
40. John Keats
41. Søren Kierkegaard
42. David Herbert Lawrence: including *Sons and Lovers*
43. Primo Levi
44. Clive Staples Lewis
45. Herman Melville: including *Typee*
46. John Milton: including *Paradise Lost, Samson Agonistes*
47. Marianne Moore
48. Toni Morrison: including *Beloved, Song of Solomon*
49. Flannery O'Connor
50. Eugene O'Neill: including *Desire under the Elms*
51. Francis William Newman: including *Phases of Faith, or Passages from the History of my Creed*



WILLIAM FAULKNER
1897 - 1962

LITERATURE MENTIONED CONT.



MARY SHELLEY
1797 - 1851

52. Luigi Pirandello, including
Six Characters in Search of an Author
53. Michael Pollan: including
The Botany of Desire
54. Alexander Pope
55. Ezra Pound
56. Marilynne Robinson:
including *Gilead*
57. Christina Rossetti
58. Dante Gabriel Rossetti
59. John Ruskin
60. Sir Walter Scott
61. William Shakespeare: including
Antony and Cleopatra, Cymbeline, Hamlet,
King Lear, Merchant of Venice
62. Mary Shelley: including *Frankenstein*
63. Percy Bysshe Shelley
64. Edmund Spenser: including
The Faerie Queene
65. John Steinbeck: including
The Grapes of Wrath
66. Wallace Stevens: including
"Peter Quince at the Clavier"
67. Algernon Charles Swinburne
68. Alfred Tennyson: including
Poems In Memoriam A.H.H.
69. Henry David Thoreau
70. John Updike: including
In the Beauty of the Lilies
71. Wakefield Master:
Second Shepherd's Play
72. Elwyn Brooks White:
including *Charlotte's Web*

INTRODUCTION

1 For one school, Berry College, the college president, who was a member of the English department, was contacted; as president, he trumped the department chair.

2 An English department secretary, a professor from another department, and an interviewed English professor from another school.

The Bible has had a profound influence on European and American arts and letters as well as the shape of the English language itself. In 1986, English professors at U.S. colleges were asked what they wished incoming freshmen had read before entering their college. The most frequently named work was the Bible (Juhasz & Wilson). In a 1997 study, 81 percent of American high school English teachers reported it was important to teach some Bible literature (Wachlin). In a 2005 study, 98 percent of American high school English teachers reported that Bible literacy was academically advantageous (Wachlin).

What do today's college students need to know about the Bible to participate fully and equally in the courses taught in America's elite colleges and universities? This study surveyed English professors at 34 colleges and universities to get their assessment on how important Bible literacy is to a good education: What advantages do students who are Bible literate have when it comes to approaching English and American literature? What problems have these scholars observed in their students who lack this basic knowledge? What do incoming freshmen in college-level English courses need to know about the Bible?

METHODOLOGY

Using *U.S. News'* 2005 rankings in four college categories (national universities, public universities, liberal arts colleges, and comprehensive colleges) as a guide, we secured interviews with English professors from both the *first*- and *second*-rated schools in all four categories. Once an interview at a top-ranked school was arranged, we also sought additional interviews with professors at rated nearby colleges and universities. The initial contact was made with English department chairs.¹ Thirty-four of 44 initial contacts resulted in an interview with a professor at that university. Five professors were interviewed as a result of a recommendation from someone other than the chair.²

Eleven professors from public universities, 19 professors from private non-sectarian universities, and 9 professors from religiously-affiliated colleges or universities were interviewed for this study.

We interviewed professors from the following schools (with their rankings from *U.S. News* in parenthesis).

NATIONAL UNIVERSITIES: Princeton University (#1 tied), Harvard University (#1 tied), Yale University (#3), Stanford University (#5 tied), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (#5 tied), Columbia University (#9), Northwestern University (#11), University of Chicago, (#14), University of Notre Dame (#18), Rice University (#17), Brown University (#13), University of California at Berkeley (#21), University of Michigan at Ann Arbor (#22 tied), University of Virginia (#22 tied), Tufts University (#28), The College of William and Mary (#31), New York University (#32), University of Washington (#46), University of Maryland (#56), Texas A&M University (#62), Brigham Young University (#74), Howard University (#90), University of Utah (#111), and University of Oregon (#117).

LIBERAL ARTS: Williams College (#1), Amherst College (#2 tied), DePauw University (#42), Wheaton College (#51), and Gordon College (unranked, convenience sample).

LARGE PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES: University of California at Berkeley (#1), University of Michigan (#2 tied), University of Virginia (#2 tied), The College of William and Mary (#6), University of Washington (#14), University of Maryland (#18), Texas A&M University (#22), University of Oregon, University of Utah.

COMPREHENSIVE COLLEGES: Stonehill College (#1, North), Berry College (#2, South), Calvin College (#2, Midwest), Corban College (#8, West), and Concordia University at Portland, Oregon (unranked, convenience sample).

Nine of the 34 colleges and universities included in this study were religiously affiliated: Berry College, Brigham Young University, Calvin College, Concordia University, Corban College, Gordon College, University of Notre Dame, Stonehill College, and Wheaton College.

The comments of two additional professors were included in the study—professors whom the principal investigators met through this research and related Bible literacy work: Roger Baker, Brigham Young University (#74 national); and Paul Parrish, Texas A&M University (#22 public). Throughout the report, the additional professors were *not* counted in the data tabulations.



CHARLES DICKENS
1812 - 1870



TONI MORRISON
1931 -

1. "CONSIDERING THE LITERATURE YOU TEACH, HOW DOES KNOWLEDGE OF GREEK AND ROMAN MYTHOLOGY ADVANTAGE OR DISADVANTAGE A STUDENT?"			
ANSWER	ADVANTAGE	NEUTRAL	DISADVANTAGE
# OF PROFESSORS	36	3	0

No professor felt that knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology was a disadvantage. Typical responses from professors in this study:

- I teach a sophomore survey course. Students who have read the Bible and Homer and Virgil know a good deal more than those who have not read those pieces. (Prof. J. Dennis Huston, Rice University)

Three professors expressed more neutral opinions:

- Most of the texts that I use by now have copious footnotes so the students who don't have the background usually can get it, or sometimes I print up—I tend not to presume they know anything—a section of Ovid³ if I feel that that's an important source for the poem. (Prof. Karen E. Swann, English Department Chair, Williams College)

2. "CONSIDERING THE LITERATURE YOU TEACH, HOW DOES KNOWLEDGE OF THE BIBLE ADVANTAGE OR DISADVANTAGE A STUDENT?"			
ANSWER	ADVANTAGE	NEUTRAL	DISADVANTAGE
# OF PROFESSORS	36	3	0

English professors overwhelmingly agreed that knowledge of the Bible was an academic advantage.

Some typical responses to this interview question were:

"Indispensable," "terribly important," "great advantage," "absolutely crucial," "reasonable acquaintance is an advantage," "enormously advantages," "tremendous advantage."

"The Bible has been the most influential text in all of Western culture. It's difficult to understand medieval or early modern or much of modern literature without knowing it.... This is true for teaching Chaucer,⁴ but it's also true for teaching Toni Morrison⁵ as much. And obviously a knowledge of the Bible is indispensable." (Prof. Barbara Newman, Northwestern University)

Eight professors volunteered that knowledge of the Bible was a greater advantage than knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology. For example:

- Knowledge of the Bible is a greater advantage than a knowledge of mythology. (President J. Scott Colley, Berry College)
- In English tradition and also for an American tradition begun by Puritan writers, a knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament is even more crucial than classical references. For students not to have that is almost crippling in their ability to be sophisticated readers. (Prof. Ulrich Knoeflmacher, Princeton University)
- Probably the Bible is more important for the courses I teach, whether it's *In Memoriam*⁶ or Newman's autobiography.⁷ *Jane Eyre* is just filled with Biblical references.⁸ (Prof. Richard J. Dunn, English Department Chair, University of Washington)
- Knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology and the knowledge of the Bible—certainly they are crucial. If you're going to be a serious student of literature, without knowledge of those, you're going to miss a lot. A huge amount. The writers you're reading were steeped in them. And even when they're not, they are so unconsciously, as in when Aeneas⁹ departed Rome, and you know founded Rome, et cetera. It's an obvious allusion they can look up.

But what about something like in a fiction class I do: Melville's *Typee*.¹⁰ So Melville jumps ship, he lands in the South Sea. And he describes himself at one point—his leg is injured—like a serpent slithering into the South Sea Island. He's obviously corrupting it. Clearly, he's playing on Eden narrative. If you don't have that, you're going to miss the whole frame of reference. There you go.

Or Flaubert has one of his tales, "A Simple Heart."¹¹ He's modeling his servant-woman wife on Jesus, who comes not to be served

3 *Metamorphoses* by Ovid.

4 Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–1400), English author, poet, philosopher, bureaucrat (courtier), and diplomat.

5 Toni Morrison (1931–), American author who won the Nobel Prize in Literature, 1993.

6 *Poems In Memoriam A.H.H.*, by Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson (1809–1892), English poet.

7 Francis William Newman (1805–1897), English scholar and miscellaneous writer.

8 *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë (1816–1854).

9 Aeneas (or Aineias), a Trojan hero, was a character in Homer's *Iliad* and Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*.

10 Herman Melville (1819–1891), American author.

11 Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880), French novelist of the realist school, best known for *Madame Bovary* (1857).

12 William Blake
(1757–1827),
British poet.

13 Sir Philip Sidney
(1554–1586),
British writer.

14 Edmund Spenser
(1552–1599),
English poet.

15 John Milton
(1608–1674),
English poet, famous for
his Epic work *Paradise Lost*
(1667).

16 Alexander Pope
(1688–1744),
English poet and writer.

17 William Wordsworth
(1770–1850),
English poet.

18 James Arthur Baldwin
(1924–1987),
American writer.

but to serve and whose parables are played out in the existence of this servant woman Flaubert is writing about. If you don't know that, you're missing his whole point. So absolutely, you're not going to be a serious student of literature without knowledge of these things." (Ina Lipkowitz, Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

- British romantic writers, 19th century writers, generally are really steeped in the Bible, and it creates important patterns for them. Not just in terms of specific references to texts and figures from the Bible, but also in terms of large-scale patterns for how to organize literary form. So for instance Blake said that the Bible is the great code of art, and he drew a great deal of his inspiration, especially in terms of how to imagine ways of shaping poetry, shaping works of literature.¹² He drew a great deal of his inspiration from the Bible, so it's very important. The whole idea of Biblical history is extremely important to the period. The idea of Genesis to a New Jerusalem, these are really key ideas for how writers of my period think about history. So there's a lot that students benefit from if they have some access to this material coming into the class. (Prof. Steven Goldsmith, University of California at Berkeley)

- I can only say that if a student doesn't know any Bible literature, he or she will simply not understand whole elements of Shakespeare, Sidney,¹³ Spenser,¹⁴ Milton,¹⁵ Pope,¹⁶ Wordsworth.¹⁷ One could go on and on and on. So just add that it's rich and beautiful and wonderful material in and of itself, a very important part of a liberal education. The Bible has continued to be philosophically, ethically, religiously, politically influential in Western, Eastern, now African cultures, and so not to know it—whether one is a Jew or Christian—seems to me not to understand world culture. It's not just Western culture. And in terms of my own field, English and American literature is simply steeped in Biblical legends, morality, Biblical figures, Biblical metaphors, Biblical symbols, and so it would be like not learning a certain kind of grammar or vocabulary and trying to speak the language or read the language. Can't do without it. (Prof. Robert Kiely, Harvard University)

- The Bible comes up at every turn. Poetry, even modern poetry, is informed by Biblical material. The Humanities course also requires familiarity with the Bible. And the courses in African-American literature that survey the corpus of African-American writing are

thoroughly saturated with the Bible—James Baldwin for instance.¹⁸ A play such as Goethe's *Faust*¹⁹ is based on the Book of Job.... Even though I do a lot of modern stuff, the Bible's still very relevant. (Prof. Jon Stanton Woodson, Howard University)

- You can't really study Western literature intelligently or coherently without starting with the Bible.... You're simply ignorant of yourself if you don't know the Bible. (Prof. Gerald L. Bruns, University of Notre Dame)

- There's no way to probe, understand, respond to, appreciate literature in English where that appreciation and understanding need to be more than superficial, need to be general, without a knowledge of the Bible. There it is. (Prof. Ralph Williams, University of Michigan)

Three professors expressed more neutral opinions:

- It varies; I really wish students knew the Bible for William Blake. (Prof. Karen E. Swann, English Department Chair, Williams College)

- You take *Absalom, Absalom!*,²⁰ the title of Faulkner's novel, and then Absalom who is the parish clerk in "The Miller's Tale" of Chaucer.²¹ Five hundred years separate the two texts. Figurative use is made of each, though they both depend on the allegorical notion of long, long hair being the symbol of pride. It might be useful, but it's just a blessing when it happens for a student to know that story in the Old Testament. But if a student doesn't know it, I send him a Xerox handout: "Read it; why did Faulkner choose this title?" (Prof. Howell D. Chickering Jr., Amherst College)

Several professors expressed doubts that the negative effects of Bible illiteracy on students' comprehension of literature could be compensated by noting references in footnotes, or other similar techniques. A failure to be Bible literate means students must spend more time "decoding" the Bible's literal meaning, and even when they grasp a specific allusion they may not fully comprehend larger issues the writer is raising.

- Many of my students, perhaps the majority of them, are quite secular and have very little knowledge of the Bible. This is a major disadvantage. Of course, they have footnotes to explain things, but

¹⁹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), German painter, novelist, dramatist, poet, humanist, scientist, and philosopher.

²⁰ *Absalom, Absalom!* by William Cuthbert Faulkner (1897–1962), Nobel Prize-winning American novelist.

²¹ "The Miller's Tale" from *The Canterbury Tales*, by Geoffrey Chaucer (ca.1343–1400).

22 "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess." Matthew 23:25 KJV

23 "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction: repentance shall be hid from mine eyes." Hosea 13:14 KJV

24 "So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Corinthians 15:54-57 KJV

25 John Donne (1572-1631), "Holy Sonnets: Death, be not proud."

that's not the same. It's like having to explain the punch line of a joke. It isn't funny anymore. (Prof. Barbara Newman, Northwestern University)

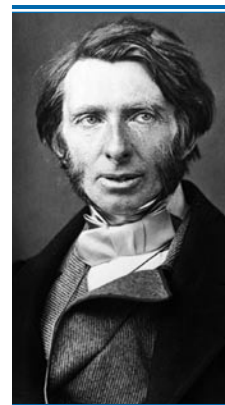
- It's valuable for me to tell you this because I'm not a Christian. I'm a Jew. I know the Hebrew Bible better than I know the New Testament. But I know the New Testament. I know St. Matthew. If I teach Chaucer, and Chaucer is mocking the Prioress for wiping the edge of the cup clear. The Padre said, Woe, you scribes and Pharisees. You keep the inside of the cup dirty, but the outside you wipe clean.²² This I have to relate to my students because they can't pick it up. They're not going to find it in the footnotes of the text either, I've discovered.

Or when you have the old man in Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale" who wants to die and doesn't know how to die and the revelers who want to kill death, and again then you get the same thing in the figure of despair in Spenser and you get it in Milton. Well, students say, Well, how can one kill death? Well, it goes down from Hosea²³ to St. Paul, you know: Death, thou shalt die.²⁴ I used to teach a sonnet by John Donne about death be not proud.²⁵ So, you know, there's a kind of substantial theological basis that's part of a literary culture that they need to understand. (Prof. Ulrich Knoepfelmacher, Princeton University)

- [With] poetry and autobiography as my primary fields, it helps to know the stories in Genesis and Exodus. It certainly helps to know the New Testament stories and something of the Book of Acts. But if a student doesn't know a reference, I assume that he or she can look at the footnotes in the text and go and look up whatever the Biblical story or reference might be. Now obviously if students know those intimately, they will recognize allusions or paraphrases or even quotations right off. Where the student who's never read any of the Bible won't. And that's a disadvantage if you're doing advanced work. (Prof. Linda H. Peterson, Director of Graduate Studies, Yale University)

- Students without Bible knowledge are always having to spend their energies just kind of decoding it. (Prof. Kevin Dunn, Dean of Arts and Sciences College, Tufts University)

- In each new edition of anthologies, the footnotes become more numerous to try to give that backdrop. But that isn't really sufficient because authors also draw on Biblical and classical sources in much more subtle and all-embracing ways. If you haven't become acquainted with those sources, I think you then are handicapped in reading really most of classic English literature. I think just grasping things directly [is better] without having to make the three-way connection through footnotes, through explanatory things; those always impede our immediate grasping of text. (Prof. Edward A. Geary, English Department Chair, Brigham Young University)



JOHN RUSKIN
1812 - 1900

3. "WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT? Regardless of a person's faith, an educated person needs to know about the Bible."				
ANSWER	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	DISAGREE	CAVEATS: "YES, BUT...", "IF...", "AND..."
# OF PROFESSORS	30	19 OF THE 30	0	9

No interviewed professor disagreed. Thirty of the interviewed professors agreed with the statement; 19 of those 30 strongly agreed. Nine agreed but with additional explanation.

- "Definitely," (Prof. Robert Kiely, Harvard University); "A no-brainer," (Prof. Gordon M. Braden, English Department Chair, University of Virginia); "Yes, of course. What we are talking about is the need to be familiar with this great anthology of well-known texts and everything that transcends individual faith." (Prof. Leslie Brisman, Yale University)

- A person educated and living in Western culture needs not only to know *about* the Bible but will be greatly impoverished and in danger of cultural amnesia if s/he is not conversant with it as the single most important literary and values source for Western culture, certainly up to and through the first third of the 20th century. And even if one rejects it ideologically, an educated person should know what she or he is rejecting. (Prof. Hans Spalteholz, Concordia University at Portland)



AMIRI BARAKA
1934 -

- I would rephrase the statement to read that every educated person deserves to know the Bible. The Bible is a birthright of every educated person, just waiting to be claimed. Not to know the Bible is to be unfairly disinherited. (Prof. Leland Ryken, Wheaton College)

- Absolutely. Without such knowledge one reads productions of 19th-century culture much in the manner of someone who tries to use a dictionary in which one-third of the words have been removed. (Prof. George P. Landow, Brown University)

- It is it seems to me an incontestable statement. I am saying at base that it is disabling not to know the Bible in trying to come to terms with the discourse of the culture. The person who is educated is being educated to a purpose. The purpose is to allow them to be optimally free and enabled participants in cultural discussions. One cannot be that in the fullest sense, and even in a very full sense, without a knowledge of the Bible. (Prof. Ralph Williams, University of Michigan)

- If you're living here in this culture—no matter what culture you're from—you have a relationship to the book, whether you've read it or not, because it's so central to a lot of our presuppositions. That literature aside, you know, it's central, so just in terms of education, I don't know if there's any way around that. That's part of a liberal education. (Prof. Kevin Dunn, Dean of Academic Affairs for Arts and Sciences College, Tufts University)

- I'd certainly be behind that statement. I'd like to think that an educated person knows the Bible because I believe in the liberal arts. I believe an educated person should know something about Shakespeare, should know something about the Bible too. This is the cultural heritage of the nation we live in. And also it is the heritage of the creation of literature in English. (Prof. Robert M. Polhemus, English Department Chair, Stanford University)

- I think an educated person needs not only to know about the Bible but to know about the different ways the Bible has been read. It's difficult for me to think of an educated person who doesn't know it. I wouldn't think such a person is educated. (Ina Lipkowitz, Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

- That's true. I think the Bible is one of the foundational texts of Western and American literature, and so I think if you

didn't read it in some religious context, you should read it in some educational setting. (Prof. Linda H. Peterson, Director of Graduate Studies, Yale University)

- It's true. That's simple. I mean whatever one thinks, it is arguably the foundational text, certainly of the West.... We need to know more, and we need to know it better.... You think about this, this is something students really need to know just to do the work they want to do. It may not be a matter of faith for them, but simply an intellectual resource. (Prof. David Kastan, Chair of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University)

Agreement with Additional Commentary

Nine professors qualified their approval in various ways.

For example:

- I'd agree with that, as long as there were comparable questions about other influential books, religious texts taught as literature... but it's kind of incomplete because their status is not just the same as a work of literature that's achieved some distinction. (Prof. Wayne E. Glausser, English Department Chair, DePauw University)

- I actually wish the students all knew much more about world religions, rather than just the Bible... I'd kind of love to see us focus more on let's get serious about this and really learn something about not just *the Bible*, but *also the Bible*. (Prof. Pamela R. Matthews, Associate Professor and Associate Head of English, Texas A&M University)

- Knowing the Bible is helpful, useful. There are all kinds of reasons a person might want to know about the Bible, but one doesn't *have* to know it. (Prof. J. Dennis Huston, Rice University)



ALGERNON CHARLES
SWINBURNE
1837 - 1909



ELIZABETH BARRETT
BROWNING
1806 - 1861

4. "SOME SCHOLARS SAY WESTERN LITERATURE IS STEEPED IN REFERENCES TO THE BIBLE. HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND TO THAT?"

ANSWER	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	DISAGREE
# OF PROFESSORS	38	22 OF 38	1

The professors added:

- *Literature is steeped with more Bible than just references.*
- *Including contemporary literature is steeped in references to the Bible.*

Every interviewed professor, except one, agreed that Western literature is steeped with references to the Bible, for example:

- Some scholars? Any scholar, whether or not their approaches involve such knowledge. (Prof. George P. Landow, Brown University)
- A truism. (Prof. Monica Brzezinski Potkay, The College of William and Mary)
- True. It's not an overstatement. I do some courses where it doesn't really come up as particularly relevant. (Prof. Wayne E. Glausser, English Department Chair, DePauw University)
- English and American literature is simply steeped in Biblical legends, morality, Biblical figures, Biblical metaphors, Biblical symbols (Prof. Robert Kiely, Harvard University)
- Incontestably true. (Prof. Ralph Williams, University of Michigan)
- Almost all of it is. The Bible is kind of in the soil so it can be in writing even if the author is not particularly conscious of it. (Prof. Gordon M. Braden, English Department Chair, University of Virginia)
- It's true even if you read contemporary or modern writers. (Prof. Gerald L. Bruns, University of Notre Dame)
- It's everywhere. As I said, it's even in contemporary literature. (Prof. Susan Wood, English Department Chair, Rice University)

Some lengthier responses include:

- Absolutely. Who could deny it? Which writer can you think of who has not in some way used the Bible? Even if to write against it, you're still using it. Who writes as though the Bible didn't exist? It's impossible to believe, isn't it?... I cannot imagine such a position. I just cannot imagine it. (Ina Lipkowitz, Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

- Absolutely. Much more so than many of them realize. I'll give you an example from *Cymbeline*, which is a Shakespeare late romance. Very difficult. *Cymbeline* is sort of the Calvin Coolidge of American Presidents in that the Elizabethan histories say that Cymbeline reigned during the birth of Jesus. Twenty-three years into his reign, Jesus was born. He refused to pay tribute money to the Romans. You get through this very complicated play and the facts that history mention: refuse to pay tribute money. He wins the battle and says, because I found my children again and everything, I'll pay the tribute. People say this is crazy. No, render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's.²⁶ Most of Shakespeare's plays never really explicitly—he's hinting at this great book. (Prof. Thomas P. Roche, Princeton University)

- I agree with this. There are few counter examples. Okay, here we have Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale," which is a story of patient Griselda.²⁷ She's an abused wife. Her husband tries her unmercifully. Well, one can teach that as a story on the psychology of an abused wife. I sometimes have taught it that way. But it's also an allegorical tale. Chaucer points out, or the narrator-clerk points out at one point that one shouldn't really be surprised to see such virtue and grace in a poor woman because God once sent his grace into a little ox's stall. And, of course, students need to know the nativity story there.²⁸ Later Griselda is compared to a female Job and we're told that no man can suffer so patiently as a woman can.²⁹ They need the story of Job. When she laments over the presumed death of her son who is about to be murdered, we're to think of Mary lamenting the death of Jesus.³⁰ All of these allusions are woven very subtly into the fabric of the story. They're a large part of its meaning. Chaucer doesn't leave them in neon lights. He doesn't have to for the medieval audience. If you have to blaze them in neon lights for a modern audience, you can get

26 "Then saith He [Jesus] unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's."
Matthew 22:21 KJV

27 "The Clerk's Tale," the first tale of Group E in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

28 "And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn."
Luke 2:7 KJV

29 The Book of Job, one of the books of the Hebrew Bible, or Tanakh, and also one of the books of the Christian Old Testament.

30 Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem during the rule of the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, estimated to have taken place between the years 26 and 36.

31 *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), Irish novelist and playwright.

32 *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore), by Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936).

33 *Desire Under the Elms* (1958), tragedy in three parts by Nobel Prize-winning American playwright Eugene O'Neill (1888–1953).

34 *The Latin Bible*, translated from the Hebrew and Aramaic by Jerome between the years 382 and 405.

the point across, but not so well or so subtly as for an audience that recognizes these allusions. (Prof. Barbara Newman, Northwestern University)

- Amen! Even the modern period, look at plays that were existentialist; they're steeped in Biblical tradition, even the names of some of the characters are right out of the Bible, and of course the concepts—the fighting against God, the rebellion, wanting to be our own person, gain control of our own lives. Those are human issues that we can write about forever. Plays like *Waiting for Godot*,³¹ Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*,³² *Desire under the Elms*.³³ (Prof. Martin G. Trammell, Department Chair, Corban College)

- It's not an opinion. It's just a fact. I can go way back to the language of Shakespeare; it's in some dramatic way the language of Tyndale's Bible translation. I'm just completing an edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and you can see just in virtually every line is deep knowledge of both [King] James' translation but also the last Vulgate.³⁴ If you move into the 19th–20th Century, it's less true in some way, but still major writers are still sort of working in that tradition, assuming that readers know it, whether it's the allusions in titles or characters. Melville, Faulkner are people obviously where the Bible is a crucial book for them, partly as a matter of faith, but also as a literary repository. (Prof. David Kastan, Chair of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University)

- That's certainly true... Think of African-American literature. How can you possibly read African-American literature and not know some of the Biblical references? And that would be true all the way through most of the 20th century literature. So, yes, it is steeped in references to the Bible, or allusions or quotations. (Prof. Linda H. Peterson, Director of Graduate Studies, Yale University)

- I don't know of any field in English literature you can teach—or American literature—that it's not key. (Prof. Kevin Dunn, Dean of Academic Affairs for Arts and Sciences College, Tufts University)

- If it were just a matter of allusions, you wouldn't need to read the Bible just to have a collection of references like the back of the book. But the thing is, it's understanding that this particular plot—maybe without even saying it—is reproducing, say, the sacrifice of Isaac, or the Jacob and Esau story.

One of the things I have to get my students to see when I'm teaching the Old Testament Genesis is you've got repeated over and over again the story of inheritance where God [doesn't follow] the custom of primogenitor. In the Biblical family, that family that we're focusing on in Genesis, the Abraham's family, continually it's the younger son who takes the place of the older and that repeated story. Well, that can happen in, say, a play by Eugene O'Neill without any specific Biblical reference and not knowing the Bible you don't get the richness of the plot, if you will.³⁵ So it's a lot. It's more than just references. (Prof. Stuart K. Culver, English Department Chair, University of Utah)

³⁵ Eugene Gladstone O'Neill (1888-1953), Nobel Prize-winning American playwright.

Only one professor disagreed. "I think I'd disagree. Some literature is certainly... There are references certainly, but there's also this very secular strain." (Prof. Karen E. Swann, English Department Chair, Williams College)

5. "IN YOUR OPINION, HOW IMPORTANT IS IT FOR STUDENTS WHO TAKE YOUR COURSES TO BE FAMILIAR WITH THE BIBLE? WHAT DO YOU WISH THEY KNEW?"		
ANSWER	IMPORTANT	SOMETHING ELSE
# OF PROFESSORS	38	1

The professors taught a wide range of courses, according to the professors' interviews and their schools' web sites, including:

- Shakespeare
- William Blake
- Chaucer
- James Joyce
- Milton
- Primo Levi
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- The Brontës
- Shusaku Endo
- Beowulf
- Byron-Shelley Circle
- Poetry
- John Keats
- Modern poetry



JOHN STEINBECK
1902 - 1968

- Romantic poetry
- Contemporary poetry
- Victorian poetry
- African-American poetry
- Renaissance poetry
- Introduction to fiction
- The novel
- English novel
- 17th century literature
- 19th and 20th century
- 19th century fiction
- 20th century American literature
- 19th century British literature
- 20th century British literature
- 20th century literature in English
- Victorian literature
- Victorian religious discourses
- Hypertext and new media
- Survey of English literature (1700 to the present)
- British literature
- British romanticism
- 19th century romantic
- Romantic period
- Foundations of Western literature
- English literature
- English novel
- Irish literature
- American literature
- African-American literature
- Autobiography
- Conversations of the West (required Western civ or humanities course for freshmen and/or sophomores)
- Western literature
- Women's and gender studies
- Renaissance literature
- Bible as literature
- Hebrew Bible
- English Bible: Its literary aspects and influences
- Children's literature
- Literature for adolescence
- Freshman literature
- Medieval literature
- Middle English literature
- Old and Middle English literature
- Medieval Italian literature
- Classics: Egyptian, Babylonian, up to Roman literature
- Cultural studies
- 16th and 17th century England
- Literature, 1600-1830
- 19th century fiction
- Postmodernism literature
- Literature and madness

All interviewed professors but one agreed that Bible literacy helped students in the courses they taught: "Absolutely important" (Prof. Ulrich Knoepfmacher, Princeton University); "Enormously important" (Prof. Thomas P. Roche, Princeton University); "Important but not crucial" (Prof. J. Dennis Huston, Rice University); "Profoundly useful" (Prof. Ralph Williams, University of Michigan); "Absolutely essential" (Prof. Warren Ginsberg, English Department Chair, University of Oregon); "Important, but not absolutely necessary" (Prof. Steven Goldsmith, University of California at Berkeley); "As someone who teaches Milton, for example, I find it very helpful" (Prof. Paul A. Parrish, Texas A&M University).

Prof. Susan Wood of Rice University described Bible literacy as "a valuable tool. I think even as our culture changes, even as it becomes more diverse, though it's inescapable that the dominant culture is still the Judeo-Christian culture in the United States and, therefore, a knowledge of that culture, a knowledge of those cultural references and cultural myths is pretty important to the study of literature."

A few professors noted they felt their students were well-prepared in this regard. "I'm usually pretty satisfied with the knowledge of the Bible that my students bring," answered Prof. Stuart K. Culver of the University of Utah. "They know the Bible, so it's hard to answer that question. Their knowledge of the Bible is usually better than mine," said Prof. Christopher J. MacGowan of The College of William and Mary.

Only one professor said that it was not important for students who take his courses to be familiar with the Bible, in part because he had learned to adapt to gaps in his students' knowledge.

- This is where our curricular developments stymie me. I will teach an upper level poetry course and I cannot assume my students will know what iambic pentameter is. So I would say that I've developed teaching methods that operate without expectations. And when I am going to teach, let us say, Wallace Stevens,³⁶ on "Peter Quince at the Clavier," which based on the story of Susannah³⁷ and the apocalypse Book of Daniel,³⁸ I just go and Xerox it out of the New Oxford Bible. Same is true for the "Wife of Bath's" references to scripture.³⁹ ...Where I find my students it's most helpful is if they know something about the history of religion, the Judeo-Christian religion, rather than the Bible as a text itself. (Prof. Howell D. Chickering Jr., Amherst College)

36 Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), modern American poet.

37 The narrative of Susannah is found in Daniel 13, in the Apocryphal or Deuterocanonical portion of the Bible.

38 Hebrew Bible Book of Daniel.

39 "Wife of Bath's Tale" from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.



MARIANNE MOORE
1887 - 1972

What about the Bible did these professors say they wished their students knew?

Some indicated a general knowledge of the Bible, or the whole Bible: "More!" (Prof. David Kastan, Chair of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University); "Basic Bible knowledge," (Prof. Robert M. Polhemus, English Department Chair, Stanford University); "What is between those two covers: What are the stories of the Bible? Who are the characters? What are the teachings? Just basic contents," (Prof. Barbara Newman, Northwestern University)

Others pointed to specific Bible stories or Bible concepts:

- It makes a big difference for them if they can learn something about the King James Bible—under what circumstances it was translated, how the Bible functioned in English cultural history, why it mattered, what were some of the intense political-social controversies that surrounded translation of the Bible. They have to understand that it's not a matter of timeless archetypal qualities of mind, but issues of tremendous social-political-cultural importance. I don't think they realize how volatile Biblical interpretation is and why it matters so much to people at the time. (Prof. Steven Goldsmith, University of California at Berkeley)

- Basics of the Gospels, Old Testament stories that keep coming up—the Fall of Man, the Noah story, Abraham, some of the stories surrounding the Prophets, Jonah and his whale—many, many stories. (Prof. Christina von Nolcken, Associate English Chair for Undergraduate Studies, University of Chicago)

- Know stories, Old Testament and New Testament relationships, the Christian account of the creation, Fall, the connection in Christian doctrine between the Old Testament stories and the role of Christ and the meaning of His life. (Prof. Richard J. Dunn, English Department Chair, University of Washington)

- My general answer to the question of what it is that students need to know is they need to know the primary texts, the chief texts of the Bible. And they need to know that they're different texts. They need to know the Bible is a collection of works by people who don't say the same thing in all matters, moral and theological. (Prof. Leslie Brisman, Yale University)

A third group of professors named specific Bible books, for example:

- The question got simple when I started thinking just in practical teaching terms: I teach old literature which sort of puts me into the thick of this as it were and into situations where—you can't teach the literature without teaching the references to the Bible, to Biblical texts, and you never know exactly what to assume that your students actually know. I started running through that in my head, and as I say, it's fairly simple: Genesis, Exodus, the Psalms, the four Gospels and the Book of Revelation. If they have that, then we can get started. Those I think are the core books of the Bible that really ramify in literature and in literary reference and also would tell students things that if for some reason they don't have in their head, they need to find out in order to make sense of what we're reading. (Prof. Gordon M. Braden, English Department Chair, University of Virginia)

- This is the most important book ever written. What does it state? What language is the Bible written in? You ask that in class, you get some amazing answers. "Oh, gee, you know the New Testament is written in Greek?" "But why?" they say. And that the Catholic Church uses a certain translation of the Vulgate by St. Jerome. And the whole controversy over translation of the Bible to Luther's Bible, Reformation Bibles. The history of the book as we know it, the post history as well as the pre-history of the book, because that is interwoven at every moment with the history culture. The idea of a canonical work and an apocryphal work and how the books of the Bible have been put together. It's not an accident. The fact that there are other scriptures, therefore, like the ones that have now come out of the jar, the ones originally found in 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls. That there are other Gospels. There are sacred books that are vaguely Christian. What Protestants and Catholics believe.

All this is all part of the Bible, of reading the Bible. How do you interpret the Bible?... The notion of the way in which Christians will consider Moses, for example, to be a predecessor of Christ. And the difference, therefore, between the way the Hebrews scriptures were read then, are read now by people outside the fence of Christianity as opposed to the way they're read by people inside the fence of Christianity. The story of Abraham: What does the story of the



C.S. LEWIS
1898 - 1963



CHARLOTTE BRONTË
1816 - 1855

temptation of Abraham mean and the sacrifice of Isaac? The answer is, It depends on who's reading it. And it's a very different story depending upon the frame of reference that you bring to it. (Prof. Ernest B. Gilman, New York University)

NUMBER OF PROFESSORS	BOOK NAMED
4	ENTIRE BIBLE
1	NEW TESTAMENT NARRATIVES
13	GENESIS
10	MATTHEW
9	EXODUS, LUKE, MARK
7	ACTS
6	JOHN, REVELATION, PSALMS
5	1 AND 2 CORINTHIANS, EZEKIEL ISAIAH, JEREMIAH, ROMANS
4	COLOSSIANS, DANIEL, JOB LAMENTATIONS, PHILEMON, PHILIPPIANS 1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS, 1 AND 2 TIMOTHY, TITUS
3	EPHESIANS, GALATIANS
2	ONE GOSPEL, HEBREWS, JAMES 1, 2, AND 3 JOHN, JONAH, JUDE 1 AND 2 PETER, RUTH
1	DEUTERONOMY, JUDITH, 1 AND 2 KINGS NUMBERS, 1 AND 2 SAMUEL

A few professors included non-Bible items on their wish list, for example:

- I wish students had some exposure to a few samples from different Greek literatures or religious texts other than to have surveys that go rapidly over the whole.... I would rather, in secondary school

at least, that students would have some exposure to a few samples from different Greek literatures or religious texts than to have surveys that go rapidly over all of the Qur'an⁴⁰ in one week and all of the Bible in two days. (Prof. Robert Kiely, Harvard University)

⁴⁰ Sacred text of Islam.

6. "WHAT KIND OF THINGS ARE EASIER IN YOUR CLASSROOM FOR STUDENTS WHO KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT THE BIBLE?"		
ANSWER	EASIER. <i>See summary list below.</i>	NOT EASIER! <i>Makes reading literature more difficult and complex, but easier to get at the complexity.</i>
# OF PROFESSORS	37	2

Among the responses:

1. Everything or almost everything.
2. All subsequent study of literature and culture, including poetry.
3. Being richer, more sophisticated readers.
4. Recognizing literary allusions, references, and echoes.
5. Understanding how characterization in novels and thematic levels in poetry are linked to Biblical allusions.
6. Grasping things directly without having to make the three-way connection through footnotes, through explanatory things.
7. Understanding and recognizing the idea of the Christ figure.
8. Reading specific authors: Arnold, Blake, both Brownings, Bunyan, Carlyle, Crashaw, Dante, Defoe, Donne, Dryden, T.S. Eliot, Hawthorne, Hopkins, Melville, Milton, both Rossettis, Ruskin, Tennyson, Thoreau, "virtually all" major Victorian writers, earlier American authors.
9. Hearing Toni Morrison's "voice."



ELWYN BROOKS WHITE
1899 - 1985

10. Finding their way around a text.
11. Possessing a solid advantage in understanding Victorian art and literature.
12. When learning Old English [literature], people who know the Bible well don't need to be translated.
13. Understanding the parable genre.
14. Doing literary analysis.
15. Understanding questions of canonicity and non-Biblical literature.
16. Appreciating the tone of the politics of the 16th and 17th centuries.
17. Making personal connections.
18. Discussing "meaning" and "values" with understanding and insight.

Professors reported that when their students were knowledgeable about the Bible, literary activities such as these were easier:

- The students I teach who really know the Bible have insights into Spenser and Milton. That knowledge is useful in class discussion and in papers, if they want to include it. (Prof. J. Dennis Huston, Rice University)
- Some [ease] is just ready knowledge so that they don't have to dig up the references and try to reconstruct them mechanically. And then when you can read in that way, you are engaging the text more fluidly.... So that's an advantage. (Prof. Steven Goldsmith, University of California at Berkeley)
- I can't think of a single writer in Western tradition who hasn't been brought up on the Bible and so that's going to, not consciously, just inform one's perspective. Like Coleridge's distinction between primary and secondary imagination. Primary imagination is your way of seeing the world. You're not even aware that you're interpreting it in a certain way. That's what I mean by a vision of things, an understanding of things that I see the writers having used. If you don't

know what the writers are working with, how can you understand what they're doing? (Ina Lipkowitz, Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

- I think you have to go on two different threads. One is kind of mere familiarity with words and figures. Yeah, they catch more allusions. They have to look up fewer things. They kind of capture connections. Then on that second thread, people who are really kind of more aware of what I've been calling *dramatic scenarios* are able to more richly understand the situations that are reproduced elsewhere. I'll use Henry James as an example because he feels like such a secular novelist. *The Golden Bowl*,⁴¹ for example, gets its title from a passage in the Bible.⁴² A situation that seems in that kind of quaint turn-of-the-century way modern is also deeply caught up in dramatic tensions that are Biblical. Knowing the story of David and Bathsheba, for example, is kind of almost as crucial as anything else in understanding *The Golden Bowl*. (Prof. Stuart K. Culver, English Department Chair, University of Utah)

- The Book of Exodus is the obvious example for constructing a plot based on an Old Testament tale. Much autobiography is based on the notion of release from bondage in Egypt, crossing of the Red Sea, wandering in the wilderness, reaching the Promised Land. If you know that narrative, it helps you understand other kinds of autobiographical narrative.

You can't really read Tennyson or Browning.⁴³ They both were raised in religious homes, one the son of an Anglican clergyman and the other a very Evangelical household. You really can't catch even some of the allusions without knowing basic parts of the Bible.

Thinking of Thomas Carlyle's *The Signs of the Times*,⁴⁴ if you have no ear for King James Bible, you wouldn't even know that it comes out of a story in which Christ rebukes the Pharisees and Sadducees.⁴⁵ Not recognizing the *signs of the times*, you wouldn't know that it's significant that Carlyle chooses that title rather than *spirit of the age* which is a more secular title. (Prof. Linda H. Peterson, Director of Graduate Studies, Yale University)

- Competence allows students to move on from there and to start being able to appreciate more fully, more quickly what authors are doing with the texts. So when Milton writes a play on Samson,

41 *The Golden Bowl*, 1904 novel by American author and literary critic Henry James (1843–1916).

42 *The Book of Numbers* alone has over a dozen "golden bowls":

"And the Lord said to Moses, They shall offer their offerings, each prince or leader on his day, for the dedication of the altar. He who offered his offering on the first day was Nahshon son of Amminadab, of the tribe of Judah. his offering was one silver platter, the weight of which was 130 shekels, one silver basin of seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a cereal offering; golden bowl of ten shekels, full of incense; young bull, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; male goat for a sin offering; And for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Nahshon son of Amminadab. The second day Nethanel son of Zuar ..." Numbers 7:11–86, Amplified Bible

43 Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861), Victorian era English poet.

44 Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), Scottish essayist and historian.

45 "He answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowering. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times? A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. And he left them, and departed." Matthew 16:2-4 KJV

46 *Samson Agonistes*, a dramatic poem by John Milton (1608-1764) based on the Bible story of Samson.

47 *The Waste Land* (1922), by T.S. Eliot (1888-1965).

48 *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996) by John Updike (1932-), American novelist and short-story author.

Samson Agonistes,⁴⁶ that you understand that he's not just repeating the Bible story. He's doing something with it, and he's creating his own hero out of the material he picks from the Bible. That's what I think immediately is important. The more comfortable students are, the less timid they are and the more willing they are to make interpretive leaps themselves, which is what I want to give them courage to do. (Prof. Kevin Dunn, Dean of Academic Affairs for Arts and Sciences College, Tufts University)

- Students who know the Bible can spot Biblical references which often carry important meanings which are not always spelled out by the author. Such students can spot important symbolism without being prodded. (President J. Scott Colley, Berry College)

- Almost everything. In the Old and Middle English periods fundamentally all the literature that was devised is Christian literature, which assumed some sort of knowledge of—except for texts like *Beowulf*, which are very interesting because there is a Christian element in them, and it's the combination of non-Christian and Christian elements in the poem out of which the poet generates a tremendous power—at least if you know how to read it.... But, it's true as well of much more recent literature. It's hard to read *The Waste Land*,⁴⁷ for instance, without having some knowledge of the Bible. It's hard to read an awful lot of texts, a modern novel like, say, John Updike's *In the Beauty of the Lilies*.⁴⁸ It's a Biblical allusion in the title. So it really does help, and it continues to resonate. (Prof. Warren Ginsberg, English Department Chair, University of Oregon)

Two professors, while acknowledging the benefits of having Biblical knowledge, indicated that such knowledge did not make course work easier.

- I don't know that I'd use the word *easy*. I think whenever I'm dealing with a work of literature which has some kind of Biblical material as a subtext, a student who has some command of that Biblical subtext will have a greater opportunity for profitable analysis. I'm not sure it's an easy thing for them. For students who have a knowledge, but not necessarily of a rigid commitment to a certain way of interpreting the Bible, it's going to give them an advantage over students who don't have it. (Prof. Wayne E. Glausser, English Department Chair, DePauw University)

• Easier? No, that's not the question. I'm sorry to demur from the question. The knowledge of the Bible precisely makes things more complex, and fruitfully complex. (Prof. Ralph Williams, University of Michigan)

7. "IF STUDENTS DON'T KNOW ABOUT THE BIBLE, WHAT KINDS OF THINGS ARE DIFFICULT? EXAMPLES?"		
ANSWER	<p>DIFFICULT.</p> <p><i>See summary list below</i></p>	<p>NOT DIFFICULT.</p> <p><i>I don't assume they know anything.</i> <i>I supplement with handouts.</i></p>
# OF PROFESSORS	37	2



GWENDOLYN BROOKS
1917 - 2000

What is more difficult for students (and professors) if students are not Bible literate? Professors identified many themes including:

1. Miss allusions and references as well as symbols and themes.
2. Inability to think with the metaphor.
3. Miss "texture" or "richness" of the text. Nuances are lost.
4. Find it difficult to piece together an overall set of patterns or themes in literature.
5. Much harder to teach literature when no one in a class of extremely bright, generally hard-working students can identify a Hebrew prophet.
6. Don't have access to so much meaning, not only in text but also in art and music.
7. Professor must work harder: "You've got to stop and explain"; or teach the references in office hours.
8. Unable to get at the essential: the way an author takes a tradition and molds it and changes it.

49 Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909), Victorian era English poet.

50 Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000), first African-American Pulitzer Prize winner.

51 "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness." Matthew 23:27 KJV

9. Secular writers who are writing out of a religious tradition or voice might as well be writing in a foreign language.
10. No way to respond to literature in English.
11. Learning Old English as a language is very difficult.

For example:

- Even explicitly atheistic poets like Swinburne⁴⁹ use amazingly detailed and frequent Biblical allusions. If you don't know the Biblical text and the way it was read in the 19th century, crucial parts of the poetry go right over your head. Whoosh! (Prof. George P. Landow, Brown University)

- Definitely themes. Definitely allusions. I think symbols become incredibly difficult. They recognize that there are symbols because this thing keeps showing up over and over again, but the richness of what that symbol can represent is often lost. So you get those students who say, "Oh, there's got to be something important about water here, but I'm not sure what it is." (Prof. Janis D. Flint-Ferguson, English Department Chair, Gordon College)

- We're doing a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks,⁵⁰ a very difficult poem, and I'm trying to get students to look at the language. Even though it's an advanced course, there are some students who slipped in that were not English majors. I'm trying to get across to them the idea they really have to look at the words very carefully. It's a lament and it says it's a lament. So what's a lament? Somebody said, "Well, maybe it's somebody complaining or something like that." So I talked a little bit about this. Think about the Book of Lamentations. You're constantly bringing the Bible up to me. So what do you know about the Book of Lamentations? They said, "Well, they're complaining in there because there's a barrier between the people of Israel and God." I said, one of the things about this poem that drives me crazy is the poem is explaining itself and you're not looking at it. (Prof. Jon Stanton Woodson, Howard University)

- I was sitting in a graduate lounge one day, and a student came in and said, "I was reading this: 'whited sepulchres.'⁵¹ Where does this come from?" It just causes big problems in teaching. (Prof. Monica Brzezinski Potkay, The College of William and Mary)

- You can't fully understand something if you're missing a big piece of it. Take someone like Flannery O'Connor who knows the Bible so well and whose references are just so built in that you'd really have to know the Bible well to catch all of that.⁵² If you can, you're going to read her better. You are going to understand more where she's coming from than if you don't. Or someone like Faulkner, people who just draw on their own knowledge and their own reading so completely that they don't even know when they're making an allusion. It just comes out. The students who know the Bible and classical mythology would pick up on those things that other students would miss. (Prof. Pamela R. Matthews, Associate Professor and Associate Head of English, Texas A&M University)

- I'm likely to get a blank. If I say *Matthew*, they'll think I'm talking about their roommate. If I say the *Apocalypse*, they won't know what the word means. If I ask them who knows what the *harrowing of hell* is, there won't be one hand up in the room. (Prof. Howell D. Chickering Jr., Amherst College)

- Take something as basic as *Hamlet*.⁵³ Why is the poison poured in the King's ear in the garden? He's drawn upon a tradition of gardens are going to be places of temptation, betrayal, poisoning. Students who don't make that connection are missing some of the richness of what Shakespeare is doing. They'll get that the king is poisoned in the garden. It's like seeing Monet in black and white.⁵⁴ You see the contours but you don't see the richness of it. (Ina Lipkowitz, Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

- I asked a class, "You all know, don't you, when Good Friday is, or what Good Friday is?" "Sure," one smarty said. "It's the Friday after Easter." So you go from profound knowledge, memorizing the Bible—the evangelical students all have their Bible with them right in class—to people having no idea. I said to that young man, "You've just set Western civilization back to year dot." (Prof. Thomas P. Roche, Princeton University)

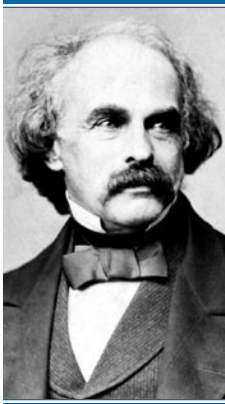
- A poem refers to Lazarus.⁵⁵ There were a couple of people in the class who didn't have a clue. They'd say, I just don't understand what's happening in this poem. I don't understand what this poem is about. It's because they didn't understand who Lazarus was. When they did, it made a lot of difference in how they understood that poem,

52 Mary Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964), American author.

53 By William Shakespeare (1564–1616).

54 Claude Monet (1840–1926), French landscape painter.

55 "Then Jesus six days before the passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, which had been dead, whom He raised from the dead." John 12:1 KJV



NATHANIEL
HAWTHORNE
1804 - 1864

that this was a poem about rebirth. The whole poem wasn't the Lazarus story, but it referred to the Lazarus story. (Prof. Susan Wood, Chair in English, Rice University)

- Students without Bible knowledge can be making assumptions about Milton that are wrong, in two ways: They can assume that he's just blithely repeating things of the Bible, which he almost never is. Or that he's making all this stuff up; it's another thing you see. And neither one of them gets at what is essential to any literary take, which to me is always the way an author takes a tradition and molds it and changes it.

For Shakespeare, the Biblical references tend to be much more oblique, much more quick hitting, and they could just bypass the student altogether. So, in a way, Bible knowledge is more necessary for him. (Prof. Kevin Dunn, Dean of Academic Affairs for Arts and Sciences College, Tufts University)

- Understanding is occluded in virtually every way wherever the knowledge of the Bible is at issue. One knows the barest bit what the writer is trying to signify, whether the writer might approve or disapprove, the way in which the writer relates to the ideas and values which are there in Biblical text, won't understand the particular resonances and vibrations which have to do with citations from the Bible, the way in which for people in a certain culture it authorizes and gives value to...what students said.

At the start of Milton's great epic *Paradise Lost* your opening lines are so intricate with references to the Bible, but not only references: "Of man's first disobedience and the fruit of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste brought death into the world and all our woe with loss of Eden till one greater man restore us and regain the blissful Seat." Unless one has read Genesis and the Book of Romans, letter to Romans, one's not going to understand very much of that.

But if one goes on: "That shepherd who first taught the chosen seed in the beginning how the heavens and earth rose out of chaos." Well, unless one remembers that the usual translation of Genesis 1:1 is, "In the beginning," one won't notice how Milton has dropped that very language into his poem. But for his readers—listeners—who would hear that, the presence of those words not only resonate but words would

carry with them the authority of the beginning of the Bible itself, but constitutes a sort of power—gives power and resonance to his own construction. You learn that later on Milton says that an angel came to him at night and gave him the power unpremeditated.... he sees this word appears in some special way inspired....out of recognizing those three words—in *the beginning*—has a different sense of the resonance of his claim. (Prof. Ralph Williams, University of Michigan)

56 George Herbert
(1593-1633).
English poet and orator.

- Where it can disadvantage students obviously is that they just don't understand references. They don't understand contexts that were there, very vivid in the minds of the author and the original readership.... Obviously *Paradise Lost*. Obviously religious poetry, and I teach a fair amount of 17th-century devotional lyric, which is one of the great periods in English literature for religious poetry. You're not getting very far with George Herbert without a pretty good sense of the Bible.⁵⁶ I also mentioned Revelation, which is very important to appreciating the tone of a lot of the politics of the 16th and 17th centuries. Students don't have a sense of the intensity of some of the political and cultural polemics of the 16th and 17th centuries without having a sense of how vivid that book was, particularly for Protestants. (Prof. Gordon M. Braden, English Department Chair, University of Virginia)

- It's not that it's impossible to read some writers without a Biblical background, but that you would miss a whole dimension to their work. When people meet William Blake without a background in the Bible, he seems eccentric, merely visionary author, quite obscure. His work seems to come purely out of the blue as if it just shot like a lightening bolt out of his own quirky derivation. If you have a Biblical background, you can begin to see how his thinking and how his imagination is grounded in some of this entrance of literature and it gives you a much more solid framework for understanding where he comes from culturally, and not just reading him as idiosyncratic. (Prof. Steven Goldsmith, University of California at Berkeley)

In addition to contributing to the above, five professors who acknowledge additional difficulties also expressed positive views about their students who were not Bible literate, or added other explanations, for example:



EMILY DICKINSON
1830 - 1886

- On the other hand, I would say that some of my best students are students who really don't know the [Bible] text and are very open-minded, have no prejudices one way or the other and are blown away by how—not only how lively and wonderful and beautiful and powerful it is, but of what great wisdom there is in it. I mean that—I shouldn't say that doesn't occur to the students who know something about it, but not say that—it almost seems more of a surprise to students who come more innocently to the text. (Prof. Robert Kiely, Harvard University)

8. "THINKING OVER THE YEARS SINCE YOU BEGAN TEACHING, WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE ABOUT THE TRENDS IN WHAT YOUR STUDENTS KNOW ABOUT THE BIBLE? HOW—IF AT ALL—HAS THAT CHANGED HOW YOU TEACH?" *(Some professors gave more than one answer.)*

# OF PROFESSORS	ANSWER
18	LESS BIBLE KNOWLEDGE
9	THE SAME BIBLE KNOWLEDGE
1	MORE BIBLE KNOWLEDGE

# OF PROFESSORS	UNSURE/SOMETHING ELSE
6	MORE RELIGIOUS, MORE INTERESTED IN RELIGION
5	STUDENTS KNOW LESS THAN THEY THINK/SAY
4	MORE DIVERSITY ON CAMPUS
4	GEOGRAPHIC/SCHOOL DIFFERENCES IN BIBLE KNOWLEDGE
3	SATISFIED WITH STUDENTS' BIBLE KNOWLEDGE
2	BETTER STUDENTS OVERALL

YEARS OF TEACHING	
PROFESSORS	5-45

# OF PROFESSORS	CHANGES MADE IN TEACHING
12	SUPPLEMENT COURSE MATERIAL WITH BIBLE LITERATURE LESSONS
2	INCLUDE BIBLE LITERATURE COURSE IN CURRICULUM
1	NO CHANGE
1	TAKE MORE TIME TO TEACH

Eighteen professors perceived that Bible knowledge among their students had decreased. For example:

- I think even students who think of themselves as religious don't necessarily have a direct sort of feel for the Bible as a text. I wouldn't say it's a catastrophic falling off, but it's the trend. Even students who think of themselves as Christians don't read the Bible in a way that used to be pretty much universal. (Prof. Gordon M. Braden, English Department Chair, University of Virginia)

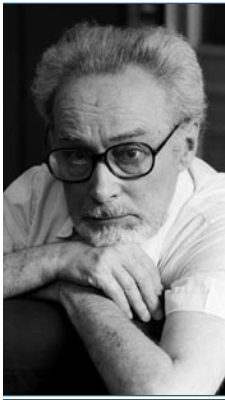
- In sum, students are obviously less Biblically literate than when I started in this business a few decades ago. The irony is that most still regard the Bible as the word of God. The overgeneralization makes the point: "It is a book everyone quotes but no one reads." Perhaps it is more accurate to say that many people quote the Bible, fewer read it. (Prof. Roger G. Baker, Brigham Young University)

- The bottom line, of course, is that very, very few students know anything about the Bible. Far fewer students know the Bible. (Prof. George P. Landow, Brown University)

- Oh, it's going down! Definitely. We teach Bible literature because my colleagues felt it would be necessary for students to have the basic introduction to the Bible. I can't think of any other course that we teach in the department that we use as background knowledge....Our students are very unusual in that our students have a greater knowledge of the Bible than students from other institutions. I hear this from other people who come to teach here. (Prof. Monica Brzezinski Potkay, The College of William and Mary)



GEORGE ORWELL
1904 - 1950



PRIMO LEVI
1919 - 1987

Nine professors perceived their students' Bible literacy had stayed about the same. The majority of these saw Bible literacy at a steady "low level," but not all:

- I don't think there is a trend I can identify. You would think in the general population that there would be a decline in the knowledge of the Bible. But here there are still a significant number of students that come out of Black Christian tradition, Catholic or Evangelical Protestant traditions. (Prof. Linda H. Peterson, Director of Graduate Studies, Yale University)

- I haven't noticed that Biblical literacy's gone down in particular, nor up. It's a pretty low level. And this is not a trend—it's just evident. (Prof. Kevin Dunn, Dean of Academic Affairs for Arts and Sciences College, Tufts University)

- I'm usually pretty satisfied with the knowledge of the Bible that my students bring in. I can make references, and in some cases they know certain passages much better than I. (Prof. Stuart K. Culver, English Department Chair, University of Utah)

One professor saw an increase in Bible knowledge among his students:

- It's nothing that I track with any kind of study. So, it is just a very loose impression. I'd say in the class that I walk into now, as opposed to 20 years ago, I'm almost certain to have a pocket of students who've been taught the Bible pretty carefully and retained it. (Prof. Wayne E. Glausser, English Department Chair, DePauw University)

Several professors perceived an increase in openness about religion or attraction to religion among their students, although not necessarily an increase in Bible knowledge:

- I think the most recent trend is one finds a greater number of students than one did years ago who are overtly pious in one way or another. They identify themselves as Christians. They identify themselves as Orthodox Jews. And so your discussion of the Bible is a different discussion in that venue. It's not that they know any more about the Bible. There are edgier things you have to deal with students saying, "Christ didn't mean that." Or "He wouldn't have said that."

Or “In my church we believe such and such.” I wish that translated into actually knowing more about the Bible. (Prof. Ernest B. Gilman, New York University)

57 Hillel, Jewish campus organization.

- I would say, most broadly, that there’s much, much, much more interest in religion than there was when I first came to Harvard—all religions. Students wanting to know about their own even. And it’s another fascinating thing that students who’ve been brought up in nonreligious families, sometimes comment—whether it’s this course or other courses or other experiences here—begin going to Hillel⁵⁷ or to Protestant church or to Catholic church here.... When I first came to Harvard, religion was regarded as a private matter.... I also would say how students—although they are proud of their own heritage—are also perhaps more ecumenical than students were 20 or 30 years ago. I don’t think students are so much trying to convert one another as make friends across doctrinal-traditional lines. I think it’s almost as though a tradition can be enriching. It’s like your ethnic background or other cultural background. You can be proud of it and still be very interested in and respectful of something different. And that all seems to have increased and sort of flourished more in the last 10 or 15 years.... Students learn that there are all kinds of Catholics and all kinds of Presbyterians. People who think that there’s absolute uniformity within a particular church are in for a surprise, because once they sort of start talking to others, they find out that there’s quite a wide range of belief and attitude even within the same fold. And that’s probably a healthy thing too. (Prof. Robert Kiely, Harvard University)

Several noted the religious backgrounds of students were becoming more diverse:

- It’s becoming more diverse. We get more multi-cultural. Although some of those students’ families have lived in this country for a while and some of them are steeped in sort of Judeo-Christian terminology and references, most of them I would say aren’t. (Prof. Susan Wood, Chair in English, Rice University)
- We have a larger population that is not Western or that is totally secular. So there are students who are missing this piece of fundamental crucial background. (Prof. Leslie Brisman, Yale University)

Twelve professors reported supplementing literature teaching by introducing Bible information in order to compensate for their students' lack of background knowledge:

- Your teaching has to be more supplemental. You have to give more attention to bringing those in. Their textbooks do that with more extensive notes to the reader. But you still have to do it in class as well. (Prof. Edward Geary, Brigham Young University)

- Unfortunately, except for orthodox and conservative Jews, who know the Old Testament, and Catholics who remember their catechism, almost no students, other than those few who major in religious studies, have any knowledge of the Bible. Clueless. If in a discussion of Renaissance, Romantic, Modern, and Postmodern notions of creativity, I draw upon Genesis and the Gospel of John, I have to relate the scriptural texts first. (Prof. George P. Landow, Brown University)

- When reading literature, if I sense in the class that there is only scattered if any knowledge of the material in the Bible which is being deployed in that text, then I stop and provide that for them. But I can only do that within a class which is focused on the other material to a limited degree. (Prof. Ralph Williams, University of Michigan)

- A lot of textbooks compensate for students' lack of knowledge, as well. So they will put a footnote to—as we do in the *Norton Reader*—to the Biblical passage.⁵⁸ Now I'm not sure that all students know what that means when it says, I Corinthians chapter and verse. (Prof. Linda H. Peterson, Director of Graduate Studies, Yale University)

9. "ANY ADDITIONAL COMMENTS REGARDING THE BIBLE AND A GOOD EDUCATION—ESPECIALLY IF MY QUESTIONS HAVE NOT FAIRLY REPRESENTED YOUR OVERALL PERSPECTIVE OF THE BIBLE AND EDUCATION?" (Some professors made more than one "additional comment.")	
# OF PROFESSORS	ANSWER
12	BIBLE LITERACY IS IMPORTANT.
10	BIBLE LITERACY IS MISSING AMONG STUDENTS.
6	TEACHING ABOUT THE BIBLE IS A RELIGIOUS/POLITICAL CHALLENGE.
6	SCHOOLS SHOULD TEACH ABOUT OTHER RELIGIONS/CULTURES.
3	BIBLE LITERATURE AND OTHER LITERATURE ARE RELATED.
11	MISCELLANEOUS COMMENTS



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
1564 - 1616

Twelve professors re-emphasized the Bible’s importance in education, for example:

- Until you asked me that, I hadn’t really thought about how often this comes up. But a lot of literature that I teach, even though I do a lot of modern stuff, it’s still very relevant. (Prof. Jon Stanton Woodson, Howard University)
- You could argue that basically everything written in English is in some way a footnote to the Bible and you can’t read Melville without reading the Bible. You can’t read Faulkner without reading the Bible. *Absalom, Absalom!*: if you don’t know who Absalom is. You can’t look at renaissance art. You’re deficient. You just do not have the equipment for understanding Western culture unless you’ve read the Bible. (Prof. Ernest B. Gilman, New York University)
- The Bible is a valuable tool. I mean, I think even as our culture changes, even as it becomes more diverse, though it’s inescapable that



JOHN KEATS
1795 - 1821

the dominant culture is still the Judeo-Christian culture in the United States, and therefore, a knowledge of that culture, a knowledge of those cultural references and cultural myths is pretty important to the study of literature. (Prof. Susan Wood, Chair in English, Rice University)

- I thought about it and there's kind of a core Bible, and that was actually a fairly easy list to make. That's not too much to ask people to read: Genesis, Exodus, the Psalms, the four Gospels and the Book of Revelation. If they have that, then we can get started. (Prof. Gordon M. Braden, English Department Chair, University of Virginia)

- The recommendation I have for my students: Any time any Bible literature course is offered on campus, take it! Pick up the background. (Prof. Wayne H. Slater, University of Maryland)

- I just wanted to say that any culture that loses a sense of the foundations of its past is in a sense doomed because, yes, it can be well and it can go in new directions, but you have to know on what those foundations sit. Spenser in the *The Faerie Queene* has the House of Pride. And it is this beautiful edifice, with all this glitter outside, but then you realize that it is sitting on mortar, you know, and the foundation that's beneath it is all these rotting corpses and decay. And sometimes I think we erect these new facades and, they're not just facades. (Prof. Ulrich Knoepfelmacher, Princeton University)

- The general tendency at most elite schools to abandon surveys, unified freshman curricula, for politically correct materials has destroyed the opportunity to give students some chance of acquiring cultural literacy, something particularly necessary when studying race, class, and gender since they were often discussed in terms of both Biblical and classical texts. Knowledge of the Bible, particularly Exodus, is crucial to studying the African American heritage.... Students find themselves cut off from the culture 2,000 years—and don't know it. (Prof. George P. Landow, Brown University)

- I certainly do understand that a good education needs to include other things than the Judeo-Christian or Western perspective. However, some schools and universities and colleges have gone so far away from that that what students end up knowing is marginal and trivial and disconnected, and I think that every culture does have certain central basic key moments and texts and figures. (Prof. Robert Kiely, Harvard University)

- I do think that our secondary schools have been terribly negligent and cowardly in the teaching of religion, or rather the non-teaching of religion, I think to avoid angry clashes with parents and community and impossible constitutional challenges. They've taken the easy way out—and I'm talking about public schools now—and decided that the easiest way to teach religion is not to teach it at all.... I think American history, world history are taught badly because of this ignorance of religion, and if students get the idea that the Puritans settled in America because they wanted economic opportunity, or freedom in some kind of abstract sentimental way, they haven't understood, and they never will understand. So I feel very strongly about that. And I feel that a lot of us teaching in colleges and universities are playing catch up for what students should have learned much earlier. But since most American students don't go to college, we can only play catch up for the elite, which leaves a lot of people out there with prejudicial information or none at all. That's too bad. (Prof. Barbara Newman, Northwestern University)

- I was struck when you first contacted me. It's something that's quite important, and I'm delighted people are thinking about it and finding new ways to address it. It just seems to me, that the State has kind of allowed the Bible to become either a kind of lost resource, or sort of belong exclusively to some sectarian interest. That whether one believes as a Christian or a Jew or a Muslim or doesn't believe at all, the fact is: This is one of the great literary works that we have. It has been for thousands, thousands of years a way in which people have engaged their becoming humanity. How could that not matter? It's a way in which they understood themselves. (Prof. David Kastan, Chair of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University)

- A possible reason for some illiteracy: I suspect many people "know" the Bible from references during sermons. Such references are out of context and generally are used to make points the preacher has in mind rather than points the Biblical author or redactor has in mind. (President J. Scott Colley, Berry College)

- What I find appalling—I think I can speak after these 15 years—is just how much Old Testament and New Testament knowledge our students don't have. And we're a fairly highly selective university here, and we get kids from some of the most expensive private, parochial,



CHRISTINA ROSSETTI
1830 - 1894

59 "And they say unto Him, We have here but five loaves, and two fishes." Matthew 14:17 KJV

and public schools in this country. And by the way, I don't see any difference across the three groups. (Prof. Wayne H. Slater, University of Maryland)

Others commented on the challenge that teaching the Bible can be:

- What a tricky thing it is to teach the Bible as literature! I doubt if that will surprise anyone. On the one hand, my job is to teach the Bible as a piece of literature, as a secular thing and to open it up to people who have no religious background, while at the same time not offending people who do have it as part of their religious tradition. I love teaching the course more than any course I teach, but it's a tricky thing. (Prof. Kevin Dunn, Dean of Academic Affairs for Arts and Sciences College, Tufts University)

- There's a divide between people who have Bible knowledge and people who don't. When I was teaching one day, somebody asked a question in class: "Where are all these references to loaves and fishes in the text?"⁵⁹ And half the class laughed, thinking this was a silly question; and the other half said, "No, no, no. What's with the loaves and fishes?" It's this pedagogical problem. Half of the students know exactly what this means and half of the students don't. How much background information do I give? (Prof. Monica Brzezinski Potkay, The College of William and Mary)

- Commitment is not the point. The commitment is to the students' freedom...not what one must believe. And that fundamental principle is not widely understood by the society or in the academy. People will say to me, Why are you teaching ruh-li-JUN in a public university? One understands that they mean by *teaching religion* teaching people to be religious. (Prof. Ralph Williams, University of Michigan)

- The other interesting and difficult part is when Biblical values are different from modern values. Things like slavery, women, violence—these are issues. These are difficult to teach, but I think they would be very interesting for high school students to begin to wrestle with. And I think it would point out to them that things were not always the way they are now, and that in a different cultural context these issues are dealt with differently. I think it would expand their horizons. To the extent that they are taught Bible, I think it's probably white-washed for them. (Prof. Adele Berlin, University of Maryland)

- The tricky thing about the Bible in an educational setting has to do with the purposes for which the Bible is used and interpretive approaches. My general sense is that for the past half century Bible as literature courses have often done very little to read the Bible actually as literature and have predominantly been informed by the historical-critical method which tends to anatomize the Biblical narrative anyway. In the last ten to fifteen years or so, I think we have seen a resurgence in treating the Bible seriously as narrative. I'm talking primarily on the college level here and primarily outside of the domain of church-related institutions.

The whole business of how you approach the Bible, and whether you can do so in high school in a supposedly neutral fashion is a difficult question. I would hope that it would be possible to be able to read the Bible in a way that affirms its internal integrity and reads that on the terms that it invites itself to be read by while also leaves space for students to respond to that in ways that are consistent with their own faith traditions. And that's a trick for public education, right?

In a church-related private school, whether it's Catholic parish churches or Reformed churches or Lutheran churches or whatever, you of course have a theological tradition to guide one's reading.

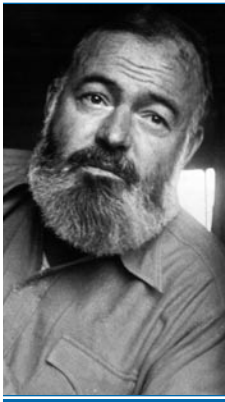
In a public school setting, unless there is some way to factor into the lesson—let's take the Pentateuch for instance: Let's look at ways in which some Protestant traditions have read this. Let's look at ways in which Jewish traditions have read this. Look at ways Roman Catholic Church and so on. And maybe even bring in guest speakers. Now that can be a wonderful learning experience for students. And a way of doing things in a neutral fashion, but to let different traditions explain how they have read the scriptures. And that seems to me to hold some promise. (Prof. John Netland, English Department Chair, Calvin College)

Fifteen professors related challenges they experienced with students of faith. And among professors who felt challenged in the classroom with faith-based students, overwhelmingly the greatest concern was students with rigid, closed minds, literal or not literal [faith-based] reading, all of which limited understanding and literary analysis.

As Professor Polhemus, Stanford English Department Chair, articulated: There's a great tension I think in the study of the Bible—



LUIGI PIRANDELLO
1867 - 1936



ERNEST HEMINGWAY
1898 - 1961

the Bible as the Holy Scripture, the Bible as the Word of God, the Bible as the document and doctrine of faith on the one hand, and then the Bible as the basis of our literary knowledge, or a basis of our literary knowledge. And these may not really have a lot to do with one another.

Several English professors emphasized that although they value Bible literacy they also value education in other religious texts:

- I actually wish the students all knew much more about world religions, rather than just the Bible. (Prof. Pamela R. Matthews, Associate Professor and Associate Head of English, Texas A&M University)

- Other religions and classical background are important because it's literature, rather than personal moral guidance; that is just as essential as a Bible background for what I teach. (Prof. Christopher J. MacGowan, English Department Chair, The College of William and Mary)

- We live in a global world, and I think students need to know all of those civilizations which have long traditions. Some of them have long literary traditions, and while they haven't had the immediate impact on Western culture, they have an impact today. And I would say that modern literacy should include the traditions, the cultures of major parts of the world. I think they do that, but they do that in a very modern view of things. And they don't give full measure of recognition or respect to pre-modern civilizations or cultures. And certainly the Bible is coming from a pre-modern culture. (Prof. Adele Berlin, University of Maryland)

- There should be a canon of other works that deserve similar emphasis. I think a weakness in backgrounds of students is that even if they know the Bible reasonably well, they're not as likely to know much about the Qur'an. Some of them, unless they grew up in a Mormon tradition, they might be astonished to learn some of the scriptural background to Mormonism. They are a little naïve about what it means to have a sacred text, what beliefs are. I'm all in favor of courses that we now are offering in a sense of comparative religious canons. As useful as the Bible is and as influential as it is, there's still some other texts that I'd want to hold up as just as important as a foundation. (Prof. Wayne E. Glausser, English Department Chair, DePauw University)

Some professors emphasized the relationship between the Bible and other literature:

- The relationship between the Bible and, let's say, secular literature is still a two-way street. And literature can be a kind of magical [device] that leads you to the Bible. Example: My friend who is Jewish started reading the Bible over and over again because he became interested in it for the first time since he was a child because of reading Milton. (Prof. Gerald L. Bruns, University of Notre Dame)

- For my freshman course, which is based—in good measure—on both the Bible and Greek myth, I like to teach Julian Barnes' *History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, which is loosely based on the Noah story. The course is based on the premise that "no text is an island," that all texts carry in them the signatures of previous texts, and that no text exists without some sort of social and cultural repercussion. (Prof. Barbara L. Estrin, English Department Chair, Stonehill College)

Other comments, explanations, and caveats professors made in answer to this question include:

- The assumption is: First, we read the Bible, then we can understand what else is written. I would agree with that assumption if I could add that you need to know about literature in order to read the Bible better—which is not a sectarian comment. Often the Bible, or the text of the Bible, or the way it is interpreted by doctrinaire, religious people, shuts out literature. It can even shut out the ambiguities, the complexities, the contradictions in the Bible itself. (Prof. Robert M. Polhemus, English Department Chair, Stanford University)

- I feel very uncomfortable in this particular political climate that all high school students need to read the Bible. I feel that that's a bad thing to insist upon in that way. I don't know that I would always think it's a bad thing, but I just think in this climate that there's such a drift toward imposing maybe kinds of designs on people that I really don't think I would be in favor of having some kind of movement where all high school students have to read a certain textbook and read from the Bible.

I much prefer persuading people to read other kinds of things: This is useful; this is a very important source, a very important part of the tradition. But not to say in a kind of law that everyone should read,

60 Those books of the Bible that were under discussion until doubts about their canonicity were resolved.

61 The Septuagint version of Jeremiah omits about 2,700 words in all of the original.

62 The Masoretic text is the Hebrew text of the Tanakh approved for general use in Judaism.



EDMUND SPENSER
1552 - 1599

because I think there are many other important parts, of even Western literary tradition. (Prof. Karen E. Swann, English Department Chair, Williams College)

- There is no such thing as *the Bible*. There are varying forms of what is called *the Bible*. There is, for example, the Roman Catholic form of the Bible, what they call the deuterocanonical works.⁶⁰ There is the Protestant—generally Protestant—*Bible*. There is the Jewish Bible. All of these are called Bible. Then there is the Septuagint⁶¹ form of the Bible which as in Jeremiah differs in length by one third from the way in which it has been transmitted in the Masoretic tradition,⁶² thence into the major Protestant version, and so on and so on. The Bible is as a collection of texts, a collection which contains material sometimes of passion, tense explorations of issues of deep interest to humans for which there are scarcely adequate parallels. (Prof. Ralph Williams, University of Michigan)

- Not only are we becoming more secular in the post-modern world of our “educational culture,” but it seems to me that we are placing far less stress on a broad liberal arts education as a basic foundation for life and placing far more emphasis on technology, vocational, professional and career tracks. (Or do these remarks merely reveal my subjective age-tinted bifocals?) (Prof. Hans Spalteholz, Concordia University at Portland, Oregon)

- Medievalists working with the Bible, or working with this kind of material at a high level, have to know the whole Bible, plus apocrypha, plus a whole lot of other things surrounding it very, very well. And they have to know commentaries. So a very deep knowledge in the Bible is required. (Prof. Christina von Nolcken, Associate English Chair for Undergraduate Studies, University of Chicago)



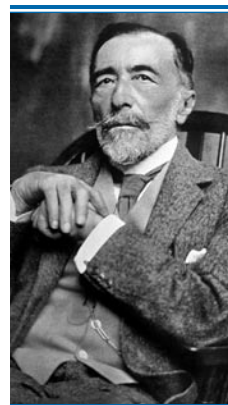
CONCLUSIONS

Almost without exception, English professors we surveyed at major American colleges and universities see knowledge of the Bible as a deeply important part of a good education. The virtual unanimity and depth of their responses on this question were striking and indicative of the goods that may be lost when a key foundational book becomes enmeshed in contemporary culture wars. The Bible is not only a sacred scripture to millions of Americans, it is also arguably as one Northwestern professor put it, the “most influential text in all of Western culture.” A lack of basic Bible literacy hampers students’ ability to understand both classics and contemporary work. Arduously “decoding” scripture references detracts from absorbing and responding to great works of art, both ancient and modern.

At the same time, a number of professors expressed discomfort or reservations with appearing to “take sides” in favor of the Bible in the contemporary context. They did not wish to associate themselves with a political movement around the Bible, or to seem to detract from the importance of other aspects of a good education, including the value of becoming knowledgeable about other religious texts.

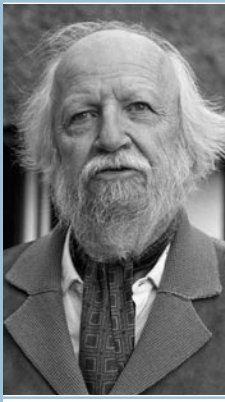
In this they recapitulate a central dilemma that has bedeviled the teaching of the Bible at the high school level. The Bible is the only enormously influential book that some voices are tempted to censor or ignore, because teaching about it has become embroiled in other highly charged cultural debates and disputes. But the next generation’s education should not become hostage to adult agendas of left or right. Creating Bible curricula in a variety of educational settings that (a) respect this book’s status to millions of Americans as sacred scripture and yet (b) are fair to students of all faith traditions and also (c) are of high academic quality may pose some difficulties. But if we wish all American young people to have full access to our shared heritage as Americans, these obstacles must be overcome. The alternative, born out of fear of religion or religious culture wars, is to advocate for ignorance and illiteracy in the next generation.

Surely Americans can do better than that.



JOSEPH CONRAD
1857 - 1924

RECOMMENDATIONS



WILLIAM GOLDING
1911 – 1993

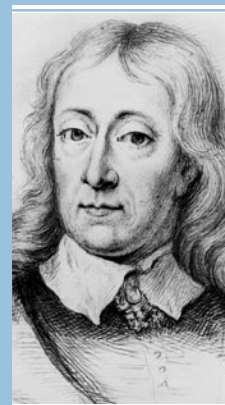
1. Parents and their children who desire to achieve the greatest benefit from their college investment should include Bible literature studies in their college preparation.
2. Both public and private high schools should offer elective courses in the academic study of the Bible, and (as appropriate) integrate Bible literacy into the study of literature and humanities at the high school level, especially for students in college-preparatory coursework.
3. Jewish synagogues, Hebrew schools, Christian churches, and Christian schools should consider the challenge to prepare children for college by offering Bible literature classes—emphasizing the Bible’s literary aspects as well as doctrine and worship (as appropriate)—to their own students and to the community.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Quantitative research: Compare-contrast students who have had a rigorous Bible literature course with those who have not. Their success in secondary school? In post-secondary school? On SAT tests?
2. Qualitative research: Explore secondary and post-secondary Bible literature courses for best teaching practices and strategies.
3. Quantitative and qualitative research: Identify roadblocks to providing a Bible literature course and explore creative solutions.

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JOHN MILTON
1608 - 1674

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS



HERMAN MELVILLE
1819 - 1891

These are the nine interview questions that the college English professors were asked:

1. Considering the literature you teach, how does knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology advantage or disadvantage a student?
2. Considering the literature you teach, how does knowledge of the Bible advantage or disadvantage a student?
3. What do you think about the following statement? *Regardless of a person's faith, an educated person needs to know about the Bible.*
4. Some scholars say Western literature is steeped in references to the Bible. How would you respond to that?
5. In your opinion, how important is it for students who take your courses to be familiar with the Bible? What do you wish they knew?
6. What kinds of things are easier in your classroom for students who know something about the Bible?
7. If students don't know about the Bible, what kinds of things are difficult? Examples?
8. Thinking over the years since you began teaching, what is your experience about the trends in what your students know about the Bible? How—if at all—has that changed how you teach?
9. Any additional comments regarding the Bible and a good education—especially if my questions have not fairly represented your overall perspective of the Bible and education?

APPENDIX B: TABLES

1. "CONSIDERING THE LITERATURE YOU TEACH, HOW DOES KNOWLEDGE OF GREEK AND ROMAN MYTHOLOGY ADVANTAGE OR DISADVANTAGE A STUDENT?"			
ANSWER	ADVANTAGE	NEUTRAL	DISADVANTAGE
# OF PROFESSORS	36	3	0

2. "CONSIDERING THE LITERATURE YOU TEACH, HOW DOES KNOWLEDGE OF THE BIBLE ADVANTAGE OR DISADVANTAGE A STUDENT?"			
ANSWER	ADVANTAGE	NEUTRAL	DISADVANTAGE
# OF PROFESSORS	36	3	0

3. "WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT? Regardless of a person's faith, an educated person needs to know about the Bible."				
ANSWER	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	DISAGREE	CAVEATS: "YES, BUT...", "IF...", "AND..."
# OF PROFESSORS	30	19 OF THE 30	0	9

4. "SOME SCHOLARS SAY WESTERN LITERATURE IS STEEPED IN REFERENCES TO THE BIBLE. HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND TO THAT?"			
ANSWER	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	DISAGREE
# OF PROFESSORS	38	22 OF 38	1



THOMAS STEARNS
ELIOT
1888 - 1965



EUGENE O'NEILL
1888 - 1953

5. "IN YOUR OPINION, HOW IMPORTANT IS IT FOR STUDENTS WHO TAKE YOUR COURSES TO BE FAMILIAR WITH THE BIBLE? WHAT DO YOU WISH THEY KNEW?"

ANSWER	IMPORTANT	SOMETHING ELSE
# OF PROFESSORS	38	1

6. "WHAT KIND OF THINGS ARE EASIER IN YOUR CLASSROOM FOR STUDENTS WHO KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT THE BIBLE?"

ANSWER	EASIER. <i>See summary list, pages 23-24.</i>	NOT EASIER! <i>Makes reading literature more difficult and complex, but easier to get at the complexity.</i>
# OF PROFESSORS	37	2

7. "IF STUDENTS DON'T KNOW ABOUT THE BIBLE, WHAT KINDS OF THINGS ARE DIFFICULT? EXAMPLES?"

ANSWER	DIFFICULT. <i>See summary list, pages 27-28</i>	NOT DIFFICULT. <i>I don't assume they know anything. I supplement with handouts.</i>
# OF PROFESSORS	37	2

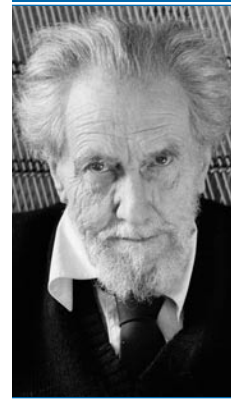
8. "THINKING OVER THE YEARS SINCE YOU BEGAN TEACHING, WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE ABOUT THE TRENDS IN WHAT YOUR STUDENTS KNOW ABOUT THE BIBLE? HOW—IF AT ALL—HAS THAT CHANGED HOW YOU TEACH?" *(Some professors gave more than one answer.)*

# OF PROFESSORS	ANSWER
18	LESS BIBLE KNOWLEDGE
9	THE SAME BIBLE KNOWLEDGE
1	MORE BIBLE KNOWLEDGE

# OF PROFESSORS	UNSURE/SOMETHING ELSE
6	MORE RELIGIOUS, MORE INTERESTED IN RELIGION
5	STUDENTS KNOW LESS THAN THEY THINK/SAY
4	MORE DIVERSITY ON CAMPUS
4	GEOGRAPHIC/SCHOOL DIFFERENCES IN BIBLE KNOWLEDGE
3	SATISFIED WITH STUDENTS' BIBLE KNOWLEDGE
2	BETTER STUDENTS OVERALL

YEARS OF TEACHING	
PROFESSORS	5-45

# OF PROFESSORS	CHANGES MADE IN TEACHING
12	SUPPLEMENT COURSE MATERIAL WITH BIBLE LITERATURE LESSONS
2	INCLUDE BIBLE LITERATURE COURSE IN CURRICULUM
1	NO CHANGE
1	TAKE MORE TIME TO TEACH



EZRA POUND
1885 - 1972



Geoffrey Chaucer
1343 - 1400

9. "ANY ADDITIONAL COMMENTS REGARDING THE BIBLE AND A GOOD EDUCATION—ESPECIALLY IF MY QUESTIONS HAVE NOT FAIRLY REPRESENTED YOUR OVERALL PERSPECTIVE OF THE BIBLE AND EDUCATION?" (Some professors made more than one "additional comment.")

# OF PROFESSORS	ANSWER
12	BIBLE LITERACY IS IMPORTANT.
10	BIBLE LITERACY IS MISSING AMONG STUDENTS.
6	TEACHING ABOUT THE BIBLE IS A RELIGIOUS/POLITICAL CHALLENGE.
6	SCHOOLS SHOULD TEACH ABOUT OTHER RELIGIONS/CULTURES.
3	BIBLE LITERATURE AND OTHER LITERATURE ARE RELATED.
11	MISCELLANEOUS COMMENTS

NOTES:

NOTES:

BIBLE LITERACY PROJECT

An educated person is familiar with the Bible

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