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Can This Class Be Saved? *The ‘Hobby Lobby’ Public School Bible Curriculum*

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About the Author

Dr. Mark A. Chancey is a Professor of Religious Studies in Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. He is also a member of the Texas Freedom Network Board of Directors. Chancey attended the University of Georgia, where he earned a B.A. in Political Science with a minor in Religion (1990) and a M.A. in Religion (1992), and Duke University, where he earned a Ph.D. in New Testament and Early Judaism (1999). His research interests range from the historical Jesus, archaeology and the Bible, and the political and social history of Roman-period Palestine to church-state issues and religion and contemporary public education. He is the author of two books with Cambridge University Press, *The Myth of a Gentile Galilee* (2002) and *Greco-Roman Culture and the Galilee of Jesus* (2005), and the co-author of *Alexander to Constantine: Archaeology of the Land of the Bible* with Yale University Press (2012). In recent years he has devoted considerable attention to the constitutional, political and academic issues raised by religion courses in public schools. His three earlier reports on Bible courses for the Austin-based watchdog group Texas Freedom Network Education Fund led to the drastic revision of a nationally used Bible curriculum and helped draw attention to the ways in which Bible courses are often used for the unconstitutional promotion of certain religious views over others in public school classrooms. Those reports also served as the basis of articles published in the journals *Religion & Education*, *Journal of Church and State*, *Religion and American Culture*, and *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Chancey now serves as a member of the editorial boards of *Religion & Education* and *Teaching the Bible*. An Altshuler Distinguished Teaching Professor, Chancey has been recognized by SMU with the Golden Mustang Teaching Award, the Rotunda Outstanding Professor Award, and the Maguire Center Public Scholar Award.



Hobby Lobby's president Steve Green has sponsored the development of a new Bible curriculum, *The Book: The Bible's History, Narrative and Impact*, that [he reportedly hopes thousands of public schools will adopt](#). The curriculum will be published by Museum of the Bible, a nonprofit organization created by Green to guide the development of a museum that will house his extensive personal collection of Bible-related manuscripts and artifacts. In mid-April the school board of Mustang, located six miles from Hobby Lobby's Oklahoma City corporate headquarters, announced that it would teach a pilot version of the course beginning in the fall of 2014.

The Supreme Court has long noted that public schools can teach about the Bible and other aspects of religion as long as they present the material “objectively as part of a secular program of education” (*Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 [1963] at 225). To be legal, Bible courses must be nonsectarian, not promoting or denigrating the religious views of any particular sect or promoting religion or non-religion over the other. As one federal court put it, “if that which is taught seeks either to disparage or to encourage a commitment to a set of religious beliefs, it is constitutionally impermissible in a public school setting” (*Wiley v. Franklin* 474 F. Supp. 525 [E.D. Tenn. 1979] at 531). Guidelines for teaching about religion in public schools have been published by the [First Amendment Center](#), [Society of Biblical Literature](#), and the [American Academy of Religion](#). The Texas Freedom Network Education Fund has extensively explored the issue of [public school Bible courses in three previous studies](#).

The [Freedom from Religion Foundation](#) and [Americans United for Separation of Church and State](#) have already warned that Museum of the Bible's curriculum steps over the legal line, and a [Patheos blogger has posted objectionable pages online](#). The version of the curriculum provided by a journalist suggests that concerns about the curriculum's constitutionality and academic quality are well placed. To be sure, this version is a partial and preliminary draft; but according to [Museum of the Bible's press release](#), it has already undergone 10 revisions. The presence of frequent errors and extensive sectarian bias at this late stage of development raises questions about whether the final product will be significantly better. The fact that Mustang's teachers need these materials well before the school year begins in mid-August so that they can adequately prepare leaves Museum of the Bible little time for substantial revision. The importance and relevance of these issues go beyond the single community of Mustang, however, given Green's plan to introduce the course across the country. What follows here is a brief identification of sectarian and other problematic aspects of Green's Bible curriculum.



Green's own description of the curriculum suggests that it was created for a religious purpose.

Some have questioned whether Green's well-known religious views automatically render the curriculum problematic, and the answer to that question is clearly “No.” What does matter, however, is that he appears to have created the curriculum for an explicitly religious purpose, namely, the promotion of particular theological understandings of the Bible and its significance. Green's intentions are on full display in a [video of the speech he gave](#) upon accepting the 2013 John M. Templeton Biblical Values Award from the National Bible Association. Explaining why a new curriculum was needed, he lamented, “This nation is in danger because of its ignorance of what God has taught.” Correcting that ignorance, in his view, is a crucial need. “There are lessons from the past that we can learn from, the dangers of ignorance from this book. We need to know it, and if we don’t know it, our future is going to be very scary.” Avoiding that frightening future is thus a primary goal for creating a Bible curriculum: “If we can encourage a skeptical world to reconsider a book that can change our world, that is an exciting journey that we are on.” Green opted to develop a high school course rather than a college-level one so that his team could “reach as many [students] as possible.”



The curriculum promotes the religious belief that the Bible is literally, historically accurate and “reliable.”

For Green, the Bible's complete accuracy and historical reliability are simply matters of fact. He claimed in his Templeton award speech that “every archaeological discovery, most every discovery, supports the evidence of this book [the Bible].... So we want to show that evidence. Here is evidence, discovery after discovery that supports the history, the accuracy of this book.” He similarly identified the goal of presenting the Bible's manuscript history “showing the reliability of this book.” This emphasis is repeated throughout his comments: “The book that we have” – the Bible – “is a reliable historical document, and we are going to point that out time and time again.” In his view, the approach of the course and museum would be similar to that of a famous Christian apologist: “Josh McDowell, I think, did good in the title of his book *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* – when we present the evidence, the evidence is overwhelming.” This understanding accords well with [Museum of the Bible's mission statement](#): “to bring to life the living word of God, to tell its compelling story of preservation, and to inspire confidence in the absolute authority and reliability of the Bible.” The reality, however, is that while such sentiments deserve respect as central, defining beliefs of certain religious communities (most notably some, but not all, conservative Protestant circles), they are not widely shared elsewhere across the religious spectrum or within the broad academic community. To present them as fact is to promote particular religious viewpoints.

The curriculum, however, follows Green's lead by strongly affirming the Bible's complete accuracy. For example, it presents Adam, Eve, and all other biblical characters unambiguously as historical personages. It frames stories of God's interactions with various characters in such a way as to suggest that those passages, too, reflect historical events. (“Was Moses mentally unstable? No. His titanic swings of emotion and behavior sprang from his special call to stand in the gap between God and the people.”) “Travel through Time” sections found throughout the book encourage students to read biblical passages not only as reflections of the ancient cultures that produced them, but also as accurate historical accounts. The book also unquestioningly affirms traditional claims about the authorship of biblical books (i.e., Mosaic authorship of the Torah) without alerting students to the fact that much of the scholarly community as well as many Jews and Christians reject such claims for many books.

At one point, Albert Einstein makes a surprising appearance to shore up a biblical story's seeming inconsistency. To reconcile Genesis's description of the creation of light on the first day of creation with the fact that the sun is not created until day four, the book appeals to the Theory of Relativity: Because “energy and mass are equivalent and transmutable” and “all matter is also energy,” then “could it be that creation begins with the advent of energy?” Such reasoning, it suggests, “seems to correlate nicely with the Big Bang Theory of creation, a mighty explosion releasing tremendous amounts of energy.” The section closes by asking, “Could it be that light on day one refers to the initial energy [of the Big Bang] released into our cosmos?” This is obviously an impossible interpretation to attribute to the authors of Genesis or to any readers before 20th-century scientists developed the Big Bang theory. Its function is to



attempt to reconcile a six-day creation and modern science, an urgent concern for religious communities that associate the Bible's authority with its complete accuracy.

A theological agenda is also clear in segments with titles like “How Do We Know that the Bible's Historical Narratives are Reliable?” The curriculum underscores the centrality of this topic with statements like “Here's the big question we need to ask: Were the stories true historical events or just products of someone's overworked imagination?” It encourages students themselves to prioritize this issue by “checking everything for reliability, authenticity, and accuracy.” In each and every historical question the book examines, however, the answer appears predetermined: “We can conclude that the Bible, especially when viewed alongside other historical information, is a reliable historical source.” All too often, the curriculum builds its case for this view on oversimplifications, misrepresentations, logical fallacies, and outright mistakes. Most biblical scholars will be surprised at the idiosyncratic and often simply erroneous ways familiar archaeological discoveries such as the Merneptah Stele, the Amarna letters, the Tel Dan inscription, and the Taylor Prism are characterized.

A curriculum might avoid some of the thorny issues regarding the Bible's accuracy by sticking more strictly to a literary approach. However, if it does choose to foreground historical concerns, then it has an obligation to explore them in a balanced, thorough, and factually accurate manner. The current form of this book falls far short in these regards, seemingly taking its primary cues from the literature of conservative Christian apologetics rather than academic scholarship.



Central tenets of classical Christian theology provide the curriculum's unifying conceptual framework.

The book's introductory material explains: “Many Bible scholars also think that these stories, taken together, seem to form a single narrative – a 'metanarrative' or grand story – that brings them all together. This metanarrative starts with the beginnings of humankind, follows with the history of the Jewish people, and continues (Christians believe) with the story of Jesus and his followers in the New Testament.” Commenting on the creation story, it summarizes, “From this point in Genesis until the last word written in the Bible, we see one long journey, one big adventure, whose purpose is designed to bring humanity back home from exile.”

The metanarrative the curriculum has in mind is, in fact, the traditional Christian notion of salvation history, the idea that God's plan of salvation unfolds throughout history in the story of ancient Israel, Jesus, and the early church. The curriculum repeatedly returns to this idea by emphasizing how particular characters and stories in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament fit into this schema. In emphasizing this reading strategy so heavily, the curriculum essentially teaches students to read the Bible as Christians. Salvation history is a crucial and important concept for understanding Christianity, but the curriculum's handling of the subject effectively presents it as the normative and normal way to read the Bible. Needless to say, Jews do not read individual stories and books of the Bible as component parts of a larger narrative that culminates in God's revelation in Jesus. Nor do many other people outside of Christian circles.



Theological concerns seem to underlie the selection of key themes in the curriculum.

The book notes: “Many themes were dealt with by the biblical writers. For this textbook, seven specific themes are explored in the various lessons... Like lens filters on a camera, each color highlights and brings into focus a specific underlying theme in the Bible and its stories.” The curriculum refers to these themes as “filters” and assigns each one a color of the rainbow, supplementing retellings of biblical stories with color-coded commentary. The specific “filters” are: love, God's presence, God's promise, God's justice, God's plan, trust, and human choice. Obviously, one could identify any number of other possible themes and motifs to discuss in reference to the Bible (violence, gender relations, the problem of suffering, etc.). The ones actually selected, however, are those that facilitate sympathetic presentation (and personal application) of the material. Furthermore, the curriculum avoids the ample stories in the Bible that might undermine that positive presentation. Such points are legally important; as one court observed, what matters for constitutionality is “the selectivity, emphasis, objectivity, and interpretive manner, or lack thereof, with which the Bible is taught” (*Wiley v. Franklin*, 468 F. Supp. [E.D. Tenn. 1979 at 150]). Considered in this light, the curriculum's choices of colored “filters” come across as a transparent attempt to teach students to look at the biblical text through Christian theological lenses.



Theological claims are clothed in the language of literary analysis.

The curriculum asserts that it is simply examining the contents of the Bible and retelling its stories, but its interaction with those stories frequently slips back and forth between literary analysis and theological interpretation. It is hard to maintain, for example, that the following discussion of God is merely a character study:

In the first verse of Genesis, the biblical writer seems to imply that only God existed... So, according to the Bible, who is this God? If we search for an answer in Genesis 1 and 2, we'll be disappointed... But there are clues about what God is like scattered throughout the rest of the Bible: Always was, always will be (Psalm 90:20), Faithful and good (Psalm 100:3, 5), Gracious and compassionate (2 Chronicles 30:9) ... Orderly and disciplined (1 Corinthians 14:33), Full of love (1 John 4:8-9).

Note in particular how quickly the text leaves Genesis entirely to import ideas from other books in the Christian canon and how it avoids reference to any biblical passages that depict God in ways less congenial to modern sensibilities. The use of attributive language (i.e., “according to the Bible”) here and throughout the curriculum is insufficient to counteract what appears to be a rather blatant theological agenda.



The curriculum promotes the theological claim that God fulfills promises.

Stories about the promises and covenants made by God abound in the Bible, and a public school course could appropriately study them for their literary characteristics or their importance for the development of Jewish and Christian religious beliefs. This curriculum goes beyond either approach. For example, its coverage of the Patriarch Abraham summarizes: “God promised Abraham three things; a great land, a great nation, and a great name. Looking through our telescope to survey the last 4,000 years, we can see that all three promises have been fulfilled....”



The curriculum favors the Protestant form of the Bible.

To be sure, the book discusses artifacts, figures, episodes, and customs from Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and even Islam at various points. Nonetheless, the 66-book Protestant canon holds pride of place in its presentation. The table of contents does include reference to an as yet unavailable section titled “Canon” but otherwise attests to no significant attention to books found in Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Bibles that the Protestant canon omits. Nor does the book appear to devote much attention to the distinctive shape of the Jewish canon, and it typically employs the Christian language of “Old Testament.”



The curriculum implies that the Bible is the primary source for positive developments in Western culture, generally ignoring the ways in which the Bible has been used to justify various forms of oppression.

Green's own comments to the National Bible Association again appear to have guided the curriculum's direction: "In every area of our life, this book has impacted our world... Our job ... is to show that whether it be our government, the education, science, art, literature, family, on and on, in every area of our life, this book speaks of it and has had an impact in our life.... The goal in this section is to show that this book, when we apply it to our lives, in all aspects of life, it has been good, because it has. In every area of our life, when we as man, live according to the precepts that are given, it is good for us. So it is true, it is good...."

The curriculum argues similarly, suggesting that the Bible is the source of women's suffrage, abolition, freedom of the press, and equal rights. Juxtaposing American freedom with the denial of civil rights elsewhere ("in some nations, women ... are not even allowed to drive a car or go outside their houses alone"), it urges, "Let us hope that winds of change will continue to bring to these countries the loving example of a thirsty rabbi," that is, Jesus. The implication is that equality in America is not only a fully accomplished project but also one for which the Bible deserves primary credit, practically to the exclusion of the rest of the Western philosophical tradition (particularly Enlightenment thought). Such comments tend to mask the unfortunate fact that in both the past and the present, the Church has all too often not lived up to the egalitarian ideals the curriculum attributes to Jesus.



The curriculum's tone at times veers close to religious triumphalism.

The title of the first chapter is “Why Do Millions of People Consider This [i.e., the Bible] to Be the Most Important Book Ever Written?” One (inaccurate) answer it offers is that “it is the only book that has been studied, distributed, and interpreted continuously for more than 1,000 years.” Soon thereafter it claims, “The Bible is considered to be the most important book in history.” Whatever the intention behind it, this frequent phraseology will likely come across to many readers as an implicit (or at times even explicit) claim to religious superiority.



Numerous errors and idiosyncrasies detract from the course's stated goal of cultural literacy.

Constitutional issues aside, many of the book's remarks and mistakes are simply odd, often in ways that reflect only superficial knowledge of the matter under discussion. For example, is its passing observation that first-century CE Samaritan women could not vote meant to imply that democratic rights were widespread elsewhere in the ancient world? Elsewhere, the course wrongly defines the Jewish Sabbath simply as Saturday, rather than from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Its brief discussion of the American Civil War rightly names slavery as a principal cause, but a nearby caption instead characterizes the issue as achieving “civil rights” for southern slaves, an understatement of slaves' needs if ever there were one.

On a related note, many film buffs will not miss the irony of the curriculum's blithe suggestion that the Book of Exodus, which tells the story of the ancient Hebrews' deliverance from slavery, “could be titled *The Birth of a Nation* (like the American film classic).” D. W. Griffith's 1915 movie about the Civil War and its aftermath famously portrayed freed slaves as brutal, uncivilized, sexual aggressors. Originally known as *The Clansman*, it lionized the Reconstruction-era Ku Klux Klan and helped spur the creation of the modern Klan. The movie concludes its approving portrayal of violent Klan suppression of African Americans with a hopeful vision of a peaceful, heavenly future for whites under the watchful care of Jesus. Needless to say, the curriculum's passing comparison of Exodus to this movie is an unfortunate and inadequate introduction for high schoolers to this particular episode of film history.



The curriculum's claim of extensive scholarly input appears exaggerated.

The version of the curriculum submitted to Mustang shows no signs of familiarity with guidelines produced by the Society of Biblical Literature or the American Academy of Religion, the primary professional societies in the field, or any substantial effort to seek those groups' assistance in crafting an appropriate course. It does, however, purportedly draw on the expertise of the [Green Scholars Initiative](#), a group of scholars invited by Green to carry out research on the items in his collection of Bible-related artifacts. The curriculum asserts that “more than 60 universities around the world are currently participating in addition to over 100 academic scholars” in this initiative, and it lists dozens of individuals as “scholars contributing to the curriculum.” Its accompanying press release credits academic specialists for its shape and contents: “More than 70 scholars have written and overseen the development of an elective Bible curriculum for high school students.”

While it is understandable that scholars from a variety of backgrounds and institutional contexts might respond favorably to an invitation to work with Green's extensive collection, it is less understandable how they could have created such a problematic course. The overall quality and nature of the curriculum shown to Mustang school officials simply do not reflect the level of scholarly input that Museum of the Bible claims. It is questionable how many, if any, of the scholars the curriculum cites as contributors have even seen it. One might suspect that many of the Green Scholars would be very surprised to discover the character of the product their names have already been used to promote.



CONCLUSION

The combination of a religious purpose, pervading sectarian bias, and frequent factual errors demonstrates that this curriculum has a long way to go before being appropriate for a public school classroom. This course's contents mirror the particular theological views and religious agenda voiced by Green in his 2013 speech. The assumption of an overarching Christian metanarrative, the repeated application of theologically motivated interpretive “filters,” the historicizing tone, the emphasis on the Bible's “reliability” – it is clear even from an incomplete version that these types of religious elements undergird and unify the book as a whole. Thorough revamping, not minor editing, would be required to transform this curriculum into a product that matches the Supreme Court's requirement that material be presented “objectively as part of a secular program of education.” Whether such revision can be accomplished by the start of the new school year remains to be seen.



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The Texas Freedom Network Education Fund supports research and education efforts
that promote religious freedom and individual liberties.

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