

# TO A BLACK STUDENT IN FIRST-YEAR HEBREW

*Nyasha Junior*

## INTRODUCTION

I believe that plans for the transformation of graduate biblical education should include the recruitment, retention, and launching of the successful careers of racial and ethnic minority students. In my experience, efforts to recruit minority students concentrate on encouraging students to apply to doctoral programs in biblical studies, but often these efforts do not provide students with an understanding of the hazards involved in entering this field.

My grandmother used to say, “Dancers don’t have pretty feet.” That is, everything has a price. In this essay I seek to inform prospective recruits of the potential difficulties in entering and successfully exiting a doctoral program in biblical studies. This essay details the things that I would say to a black undergraduate student in first-year Hebrew who intends to pursue a career in biblical studies. It highlights what I wish that someone had told me at that stage, and it provides a more thoughtful version of the usual advice that I give to students at Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) receptions.

My remarks are based on my experiences and observations as a recent graduate of the doctoral program in Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary and as a tenure-track assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Dayton. Instead of providing general advice with an aside to minority students, I am directing my comments specifically toward racial/ethnic minority students. I am writing to a black student because I am black and the students who solicit my advice are usually black. I am writing to a first-year Hebrew student because the student who has enrolled in Hebrew has taken a preliminary step toward entering the field. Nevertheless, most of my comments are relevant to nonblack, nonminority, or first-year Greek students as well.

Some readers may object to my tough-love approach. They may contend that black students need to be encouraged and that we need more black faculty in all fields. I would respond by saying that if a student is discouraged by

one article, then she should not enter the field. I hope that the future of graduate biblical education includes more racial and ethnic minority students, but I want those students to get in and out of graduate school and to be around for the long run.

My parents instilled in me the principle: “Each one teach one.” Usually, this principle applies to the importance of sharing the knowledge that you have acquired, especially with those who have not enjoyed similar opportunities. In this case, I have modified the principle: “Each one alert the others.” My primary aim is to recruit students. This is my chosen profession. I love what I do, and I would like to see other blacks entering the field. Nevertheless, my route “ain’t been no crystal stair,” and I would be remiss if I did not seek to warn others who are considering this path. I will provide seven key points of advice for a hypothetical black student who seeks to enter biblical studies. These include:

- ▶ Learn more about the academy.
- ▶ Explore the field of biblical studies.
- ▶ Research doctoral programs.
- ▶ Seek advice from faculty.
- ▶ Seek advice from students.
- ▶ Plan your exit.
- ▶ Examine your motivations.

#### LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ACADEMY

You have experienced higher education as a student, but now you need to find out about the lives of faculty. From your perspective, professors teach a few classes and hold office hours once or twice a week. Otherwise, they exist in a state of suspended animation until the next class meeting. You need to learn how the other half lives. Educate yourself about faculty research, teaching, and service requirements. Learn the lingo. Become familiar with terms such as adjunct, tenure-track, ABD, CC, SLAC, and 4–4. Start reading higher-education journals such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*. Read reputable websites and blogs devoted to academic affairs. For example, check out *Inside Higher Ed* and *Tomorrow’s Professor*. Look at the Council of Graduate Schools website and its Ph.D. Completion Project. Also, see the American Association of University Professors website and its annual salary survey (see the suggested reading section below for a list of resources). Higher education is an industry: if you plan to seek employment in this industry, you need to learn more about it, just as if you were seeking employment in the automotive or health care industries. You can no longer think of it as “school.”

## EXPLORE THE FIELD OF BIBLICAL STUDIES

You may have a limited view of biblical studies based on one or two Bible courses and your interaction with faculty at your current institution. Now is the time to learn about the wider field and to gain a sense of the diversity of the field. Subscribe to the *Review of Biblical Literature* newsletter and start perusing peer-reviewed biblical studies journals such as the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, *Biblical Interpretation*, and *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. Scan the table of contents to see what catches your eye and read the abstracts of articles that interest you.

Attend the Regional SBL Meeting in your area and the SBL Annual Meeting. Go to as many sessions as you can. If finances do not permit your attendance at a meeting, borrow a copy of the SBL abstracts and program book. Note the range of things that people do. You will not find everything interesting, but you can determine if you are getting excited about joining some of these conversations. Ask yourself, “Is this my tribe?”

You may think of biblical studies, religion, theology, and other fields as blending together. You should be aware that biblical studies is a separate field. It is text-based and divided into two main segments: Old Testament/Hebrew Bible (OT/HB) and New Testament/Christian origins (NT/CO). Scholars with degrees in related fields such as Near Eastern languages and civilizations or Judaic studies may work alongside of biblical scholars and even teach Bible courses, but those fields are not typically understood as biblical studies.

Before you commit to biblical studies check out our colleagues on the other side of the aisle in the American Academy of Religion (AAR). See the AAR program book and flip through the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* to determine if you are still interested in the SBL side. Note that some biblical scholars conduct multidisciplinary research that crosses AAR-SBL lines. Nevertheless, often these scholars developed or pursued these interests after the successful completion of their doctoral studies and in some cases after receiving tenure. For example, New Testament scholar Vincent Wim-bush directs the Institute for Signifying Scriptures at the Claremont Graduate University. He conducts and facilitates multidisciplinary research on the importance and role of scripture within reading communities, but his 1983 Harvard University dissertation was titled “Ὠς μὴ: Paul’s Use of an Expression in the Context of Understandings of ‘World’ in Early Christianity (1 Cor 7:29–35).” In other words, it may take years before you can engage in the kind of exciting work that more established scholars can. If you are certain that you are interested in combining interests and investigating topics like film and Bible, ethics and Bible, or hip hop and Bible, you may wish to consider applying to programs in those areas rather than to biblical studies programs.

## RESEARCH DOCTORAL PROGRAMS

If you are still interested in pursuing doctoral biblical studies, as a first step, you must decide if you are leaning toward OT/HB or NT/CO. Then, start to compile a short list of programs that you want to consider. You are not looking simply for brand name schools. Ask your professors for the names of top-tier programs that have a good placement record. Your professors will differ on the ranking of those programs, but the same few programs are usually on everyone's list. If you have particular requirements or restrictions, you may need to add additional programs to the list.

Investigate the programs on your initial list. Programs differ greatly in terms of admissions requirements, financial support, program requirements, and faculty specialization. Study the websites for these programs. Look at the CVs of the biblical studies faculty to determine where they received their doctoral degrees. Consider adding some of these programs to your list. Make a grid with key elements for each program and determine which programs interest you most.

One central question to ask is if you are a good "fit." In part, this means that your interests fit with what the program offers and specifically with the interests of some of its faculty. For example, if you are interested in postmodernism and postcolonial hermeneutics, you will not fit well with a program that focuses on archaeology and ancient Israelite history and religion. You may be a good candidate, but you have to be a great candidate for a particular program. The admissions committee wants to know that you have done your due diligence and that you are interested in what its program offers.

## SEEK ADVICE FROM FACULTY

You need some good advice, and you are probably not getting it right now. In my experience, black students who express interest in pursuing doctoral studies receive encouragement from all quarters. Professors who have taught you, teaching assistants who have graded your work, and classmates who know of your outstanding academic performance beam enthusiastically when you mention that you are thinking of pursuing doctoral studies. You do not need this pat on the head. In fact, you should be wary of this.

At a cocktail party a couple of years ago, I mentioned a particular black M.Div. student who was interested in applying to doctoral programs in biblical studies. Those who had taught him and interacted with him agreed that he was a mediocre and overconfident student who would have difficulty in gaining admission to a program, especially given his lack of language training. Despite this consensus, one senior scholar explained that he would never dis-

courage a racial/ethnic minority student under any circumstances regardless of his assessment of the student's potential. He feared being labeled as a racist if he offered anything other than encouragement.

I was fortunate to receive discouragement from my first Hebrew professor. When I told him that I wanted to pursue a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible, he asked, "Are you independently wealthy?" When I replied in the negative, he said, "Then, I don't recommend it." He wanted to end the conversation there, but I pressed him to tell me what he would tell someone who was determined to do it anyway. Eventually, he told me about the challenges of successfully completing a doctoral program and the difficulties of landing a tenure-track job. Another professor who taught Old Testament did not encourage or discourage. Instead, he began to list the things that I needed in order to be a competitive applicant, including language requirements, GPA expectations, and GRE scores. He told me if I did not gain admission to and receive full funding from a top-tier program, then I should pack up my BDB and find something else to do. I was sobered but determined.

To obtain good advice, find the faculty member who you know is willing to kill the dream. You are thinking of this person right now because she is the one person whose advice you do not want. Find a professor who will tell you the cold hard truth. Ideally, that person should be a biblical scholar, but it is more important to find someone that you trust to tell you the truth. Share your current transcript and GRE scores (if available). Talk about your current interests and plans to apply to programs. If you are applying soon, ask "What are my chances of gaining admission to programs?" or "How would you rate my current academic preparedness?" Ideally, if you are a few years away from applying, ask "What can I do to be a competitive applicant?" Of course, one can overcome the odds, but most folks in academia have a pretty good idea of what will cut it and what will not. At the NFL Combine, a potential player who runs the 40-yard dash in 6.0 will not secure a running back position. Sure, there are exceptions, but you should be realistic about your application.

#### SEEK ADVICE FROM STUDENTS

Faculty members have a wealth of experience, but often, they have forgotten or repressed their memories of graduate school. Talk to those with their boots on the ground. If you do not have access to graduate students in biblical studies at your current institution, make sure that you attend the SBL Regional and Annual Meetings. At the Annual Meeting, attend the student orientation and the women's student orientation (if you are a woman). Also, attend receptions for racial/ethnic minorities and sessions that focus on racial/ethnic minority hermeneutics. Even if you are not interested in that session, you will have an

opportunity to talk to a number of racial/ethnic minority faculty and students in one place. Introduce yourself and explain your interests and plans. If possible, use a snowball approach and ask someone with whom you have a good conversation to introduce you to other faculty and/or students. Do not limit yourself to seeking advice from racial/ethnic minority faculty and students. I have found that most people are more than happy to offer their advice.

Find students who are one, two, and three steps ahead of you. The steps will vary depending on whether you are a masters student, an undergraduate, or an undergraduate who will pursue a masters before applying to doctoral programs. For example, if you are a first-year M.Div. student, find an M.Div. senior who is applying to or has recently been accepted to a doctoral biblical studies program; find a doctoral student in coursework; and find a doctoral student who is taking exams. Of course, it will be useful to talk to any student in one of the programs to which you plan to apply, but you should make sure that you cover your bases with these three types of students.

Using this scenario, ask the student who is one step ahead of you what he has learned about the application process. To which programs did he apply and why? Which language courses and Bible courses has he taken? What advice would he offer about the application process? Ask the student who is two steps ahead what she learned about the admissions game and getting started. To which programs did she apply and to which programs did she gain admission? Why did she choose her current program? Which courses is she taking now? How has she handled the transition to doctoral student? For the student who is three steps ahead of you, ask about his coursework experiences. Which exams is he taking? Did he have a choice of exams? How does he feel about his decision to enter this program? How long will it take to complete the program?

If you develop a good rapport with some students, ask them about some of the personal costs of graduate school. Graduate school is tough in any field, but anecdotally, biblical studies is more difficult partly because language requirements tend to increase time to completion. You do not need to ask personal questions. Instead, ask about what she has seen among colleagues. Any typical cohort of students may experience divorce, staggering debt, chronic depression, eating disorders, or substance abuse. The toll on family members may be even greater. One professor advised me that one of the keys to successful graduate studies is having a family that thrives on neglect.

Talk to as many students as you can. Recognize that even students in the same program have different experiences of that program. For instance, a male professor may meet male graduate students at his home office and offer them a beer while they discuss the NBA playoffs and possible proposal topics. That same professor may meet female graduate students in the school cafeteria and

talk only about work-related matters. One dissertation advisor may provide advisees with a mentoring relationship that includes job-hunting advice and invitations to Sunday dinner, while another advisor may know nothing more personal about her advisees than their email addresses. Also, single students may feel comradeship by working together in late-night study groups, while married students in the same program may experience isolation by working alone at home after putting their kids to bed.

Black students who talk to me are often in their third year of the M.Div. before they begin to consider applying to doctoral programs. This is rather late in the game. If you follow my recommended steps, you can determine if and how you should proceed. As well, often black students tell me of their desire to enter biblical studies due to encouragement that they have received from faculty. Here is some advice: a star college quarterback is not necessarily a star NFL quarterback. The pro game has a different pace with different challenges and demands. Likewise, a great undergraduate/masters student is not necessarily a good candidate for doctoral biblical studies. You may have earned an A on a final Hebrew exam or on an exegesis paper. You are probably out-performing your current classmates and may have received some attention and affirmation from your professors. Get over it. A high GPA and a “great job” and smiley face on your paper do not necessarily indicate that you are ready for doctoral biblical studies. You will have to elevate your current A-game significantly.

Graduate school is not a warm, welcoming, and affirming experience. You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. I have not experienced any overt racial or gender discrimination in classroom settings; instead, most students that I know would agree that professors are equal opportunity torturers. One of my former professors makes *American Idol*'s Simon Cowell look like Mister Rogers. No one will ask you to journal your feelings about a text. Your colleagues and professors will critique your writing and ideas in public. One professor said of a colleague's paper, “It was like modern art—interesting but ultimately unintelligible.” As such, you must develop a thick skin.

Faculty will brag about the star student who graduated in record time, published an award-winning dissertation, and wrote a best-selling novel in her free time after putting her triplets to bed. That will not be you. Instead, listen when students tell you about the phantom of the program. Almost every program has one. He is a ninth-, twelfth-, or fifteenth-year student who is seen on campus almost as often as an ivory-billed woodpecker. You want to hear the horror stories about exam failure, proposal rejection, loss of financial aid, the death of an advisor, and fighting among dissertation committee members. Of course, some of the details have been exaggerated, but you need to be scared out of your mind before you sign up for this.

## PLAN YOUR EXIT

Many couples focus so much on the details of the wedding that they neglect to think through key issues that will face the marriage that follows. Similarly, many students focus on gaining admission to a graduate program without thinking about the career that follows. Most biblical studies jobs are posted online in the SBL Career Center. Read the postings to get a sense of the job market in biblical studies. Think about the type of institution where you would like to work. Recognize that you may not land at a place similar to your doctoral institution. For example, I received my Ph.D. from a Presbyterian seminary, but I teach at a Catholic university. Do you want to teach at a small, church-affiliated college in the Bible Belt or at a seminary that has and welcomes openly gay and lesbian students? Do you want to teach at a large state school or at a historically black college or university? Are you willing to sign a statement of faith or to abide by a morals clause? Are you prepared to live in a town without an airport?

After earning your doctoral degree, you may have difficulties in landing a job, especially a tenure-track position. Those difficulties are compounded if you choose to limit your search to particular types of schools or to specific geographic locations. Are you prepared to move multiple times if you do not secure a tenure-track position initially or if you do not find a desirable tenure-track position? Will your spouse/partner be able to find a job nearby? If single, will you find suitable partners on the local dating scene? If you have children, how will this process affect them? If you do not have children and intend to do so, how will this affect your plans to start a family? I do not know anyone who has a happy home life, a great publishing record, and stellar teaching evaluations. I have only a couple of colleagues who have two of the three.

If you secure a position, you may teach outside of areas in which you were trained. Often, junior faculty members teach introductory or general education courses regardless of specialty. I teach three courses each semester. I teach two sections of Introduction to Religion, a required first-year general education course. I also teach one undergraduate or masters-level course in Hebrew Bible. I do not teach biblical languages, and since almost none of my students have studied Hebrew or Greek, my Hebrew Bible classes are taught in translation. My department does not offer doctoral courses in biblical studies.

Are you willing to teach Old or New Testament or Bible survey courses after spending years learning the languages and methodologies used in your specialization? Are you willing to teach courses such as World Religions or Death and Dying? As a black faculty member, how will you respond if asked to teach liberation theology, Civil Rights history, or Afro-American religion? Some search committees and colleagues may assume that you can and desire

to teach African-American hermeneutics and that you will become a mentor to black students. In a job interview one administrator asked me, "How will you help our African American students who need support in ministerial formation?" I responded, "I thought that this was a Hebrew Bible position." I did not get the job.

### EXAMINE YOUR MOTIVATIONS

Think about why you want to do this. Are you interested in being Dr. So-and-So? Do you want to become a public intellectual who appears on National Public Radio or Tavis Smiley? Do you want to wear a suit and bowtie and talk to a captive audience twice a week in wood-paneled lecture halls? Do you want a cameo film appearance like Cornel West in *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*? Are you trying to outdo your sister the cardiologist or your brother-in-law the investment banker? Are you trying to avoid getting a "real" job? Are you working out your daddy issues? Figure out what motivates you now and determine if entering biblical studies is the best way to get what it is that you really want.

Often, black students who express interest in biblical studies tell me of their desire to bridge the church-academy divide. They took one course by an exceptional biblical scholar and armed with a little knowledge, they desire to bring scholarly biblical tools to the folks in the pew. They tell me of their commitment to remaining involved in the local church during their doctoral programs and to supporting their church educational efforts. I am not, however, convinced that these motivations are enough to sustain a student through a multi-year doctoral program. Maybe your Sunday school classes were a formative part of your development. Perhaps you enjoy teaching Bible study. Do you love biblical studies enough to reconstruct hypothetical Proto-Semitic forms, vocalize Ugaritic, and recite Syriac paradigms on demand? You can study Bible without entering biblical studies as a profession. Are you certain that this path will lead you to where you want to go? During coursework, my colleagues outside of biblical studies would tease when they saw me reading Hebrew from my *BHS*. They would say, "Girl, the Bible has already been translated! I have a Bible in English right here. Why are you wasting time with that?!" Is that you? Ask yourself, "Do I want to engage in academic biblical scholarship?"

### REFLECTIONS

Despite the horrors of graduate school, the highly competitive job market, and my hectic rookie year as a faculty member, I am glad that I entered and

successfully exited graduate school. I love my teaching and research as a biblical scholar. I realized how fortunate I am when I talked to my grandfather soon after I moved to Dayton, Ohio. I have family in nearby Cincinnati. My grandfather was planning to visit them and expressed an interest in coming to Dayton. I told him that I taught on Tuesdays and Thursdays and would be free for long weekends. He looked down at his feet for a few seconds and bashfully asked, "Do you think that they will put you on full-time at some point?" I laughed and hugged him as I explained that I did, indeed, have a full-time job. To many of my family members who engage in hourly work, it is important to work as many hours as possible and to get as much overtime as you can. To my grandfather, teaching twice a week could not possibly be a full-time job. I am fortunate to do what I love and to get paid for it. It would be nice to have some company along the way.

#### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- American Academy of Religion: <http://www.aarweb.org/>.  
 American Academy of University Professors: <http://www.aaup.org/aaup/>.  
 Fund for Theological Education: <http://www.fteleaders.org/>.  
*Review of Biblical Literature*: <http://www.bookreviews.org>.  
 Society of Biblical Literature: <http://www.sbl-site.org/>.  
*Inside Higher Ed*: <http://www.insidehighered.com/>.  
 Tomorrow's Professor Blog: <http://amps-tools.mit.edu/tomprofblog/>.  
 Council of Graduate Schools: <http://www.cgsnet.org/>.  
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