



THE WABASH CENTER

# JOURNAL ON TEACHING

## SPECIAL TOPIC

# Crossing the Threshold by Unlearning the “Truth” in Biblical Studies

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### ABSTRACT

This short essay describes a teaching strategy that addresses two of the threshold concepts named by John Van Maaren in his essay “Transformative Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Toward a Threshold Concept Framework for Biblical Studies,” also published in this issue of the journal.

### KEYWORDS

Bible intro course, threshold concepts, constructed nature of biblical understanding, unlearning, historical Jesus

In response to John Van Maaren’s [insightful framework](#) for threshold concepts in biblical studies (2020) – transformative, integrative, irreversible, and troublesome concepts which students must grasp in order to make further disciplinary learning possible – I will describe a strategy that addresses at least two: “the constructed nature of biblical understanding” and “everything is argument.” The strategy focuses on students unlearning their uncritical assumptions about the veracity of biblical texts and thus crossing content thresholds.

The primary learning outcome in “New Testament Introduction” is comprehension of how historical, literary, and archaeological evidence can be used to understand and (re)construct the social development of religious groups in antiquity. The course begins with Paul, moves to the gospels, and only towards the last quarter of the semester turns to the historical Jesus. By this point, students have already encountered much to destabilize their notions of the reliability of the biblical narratives. They are thus in a liminal stage of having to rethink many of their presumptions and presuppositions.

In order to provoke this further, I begin my mini-lecture on the “Historical Jesus” by saying without preamble, “He was born into poverty in a small town, and although many people thought of him as the king, others saw him as a corrupting element of society.” The use of the opening personal pronoun with no antecedent is key. I go on to briefly note that he was accused of being a “glutton and a drunkard” and ended up being betrayed by those closest to him. He died an ignoble death, yet post-mortem appearances were reported, leading eventually to veneration, icons, shrines, and liturgies. I conclude by saying, “Today we can still hear on the radio songs he sang while he was among us.” Surveying their looks of puzzlement, I finally tell students that I have been talking about Elvis. Who did they *think* I was talking about?

We then unpack the claims and evidence used and learn what we can from the “Elvis cult” as a social phenomenon. One key point is that Elvis died in 1977, currently forty-two years ago. In comparison, there is a thirty-seven year gap between the generally accepted date of Jesus’ death around 33 C.E. and the writing of Mark’s gospel around 70 C.E. We then

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ponder what this indicates for the “accuracy” of stories about Jesus, given students’ own knowledge of and generational distance from the life of Elvis. The conversation raises issues of memory, story, historiography, and hermeneutics – things that have been considered in previous classes but which seem to land more concretely in this moment.

The cognitive disruption caused by the Elvis discussion is a strategy that forms part of the unlearning of theological or cultural assumptions about the “truth” of the Jesus stories. More broadly, unlearning is a key part of student engagement in religious studies. The unlearning disrupts pre-course assumptions and allows students to engage with biblical texts as historical sources within the discipline of religious studies.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Van Maaren, John. 2020. “Transformative Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Toward a Threshold Concept Framework for Biblical Studies.” *The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching* 1(1): 61–78. <https://doi.org/10.31046/wabash-journal.v1i1.1526>.

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