



By Sally Holt

As a member of CLI cohort four, I was given the opportunity to study Judaism in a new way. I know that there is value to understanding religions other than my own, and I have a deep appreciation for sacred texts from my own tradition and from the traditions of others. Further, understanding history has a value that is without question. CLI provided a context for me to build upon such knowledge, and the ideals that CLI promotes have taken root in my own teaching.

“I’ve heard of Hannukah.” “I have a Jewish friend who celebrates Hannukah.” When is Hannukah celebrated?”

Every semester, I teach an introductory biblical studies course at Belmont University, a Christian institution in Nashville, Tennessee, and I hear these types of questions. While we do have diversity on our campus, my students are, for the most part, Christian and Protestant. They find themselves in a town with over 700 churches and at a university that requires them to take a course in Bible. Most have not spent a great deal of time reflecting on the scholarly approaches we utilize in class. For example, thinking about Jesus as a Jewish person in a complicated historical context that involved the powers of Sandhedrin, Rome and the Herodians does not seem to have occupied much of their time. They are young adults who for the most part, are deeply committed to the Christianity of their upbringings, and while they might know something about religions other than their own, usually it’s not much.

Many believe that the biblical texts are inspired and authoritative, and at the same time, have told me that the texts have little relevance in their actual lives. They see the texts as removed from their own experiences and as somewhat inapplicable to their contemporary world. I attempt to show my students the power of the narratives contained within the texts, and I also ask them to think about history and how understanding it is invaluable for informing us about the world in which we currently live.

We work on this valuing of history all semester, and we spend a great deal of time studying Hebrew Bible, so much time that my evaluations have at times claimed that the course should be renamed *Introduction to Jewish Texts*. When we start to study those extra biblical books, from Septuagint, some of them are perplexed. A few of my Catholic students have heard of several of the books found in the deuterocanonical section of their Bibles, but many of my Protestant students are completely unfamiliar with the Apocrypha. Toward the beginning of the semester, we delve into the different perspectives that Christians have on canon, but the real value of accessing texts from the deuterocanon or Apocrypha doesn’t have significant impact on my students until later in the semester.

When we begin to study the Maccabean revolt and read from the books of the Maccabees, my students are intrigued. Most are not familiar with how names they know from ancient history overlap with some names they have never heard before. Alexander the Great may ring a bell for them, but they have no idea of his influence on why their New Testaments are written in Greek. They are unaware of the tumultuous and violent world where Antiochus Epiphanes IV, the Seleucid, ruled. When they begin to read about the persecution of the Jewish people that they have come to know more intimately by studying their stories, they also start to make connections with the religious persecution evident in the world around them today. As we study the intolerance that led to a ban of practicing Judaism and as we learn about the family that led the revolt that resulted in the retaking, cleansing and rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem, students are taken in by the drama and emotion present in the narrative, and they have a new understanding and a richer historical perspective. When they finally comprehend that Hannukah commemorates this victorious rededication of the Temple, they are taken by surprise. It is at this point, I think, that religion and the significance of history becomes more real, more meaningful to them, and they understand a little more clearly why the liberty to practice one's religion without threat is truly a privilege and gift.