A Critical Look at Modern Graduate Education Through the Lens of Ancient Textbooks

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Abstract

The disruption of traditional teaching and learning strategies within the (post) COVID era has invited teachers to rethink education, evaluate what they have done so far, and reimagine what it means to be an educator in the 21st century. The need to reflect on 21st-century education has particularly been felt in the realm of the humanities (religion, literature, history, etc.). This essay seeks to compare the "textbooks" of the ancient world (Iliad, Odyssey, Aeneid, TNK) with modern textbooks and draw conclusions that can function as a critical lens for reflecting on modern teaching strategies for the humanities. I suggest that modern textbooks and teaching styles—without neglecting their benefits—have contributed to compromising the ideals of the humanistic and, more specifically, the Christian educational aim: developping critically and independently thinking individuals who live responsibly in their social context. This essay will, however, not remain critical of modern education but make suggestions informed by ancient textbooks to improve education in a world where remote and internet-based learning has become an integral part of 21st-century education.

Keywords: textbooks, modern education, Torah, Odyssey, Iliad, Aeneid, dogmatism, truth, ethics

> Read poetry. Don't hide in the comfort of your beliefs.
> Do the opposite. The more sceptical, dubious, intellectu-
> ally insecure you are the better it is for you.
> (Roberto Beginini)

> There are people who know everything,
> and that's all they know.
> (Niccolò Machiavelli)

1. Introduction

In this essay, I intend to contribute to a critical assessment of how the humanities are being taught in modern college education.[1] My critical interpretative lens will be provided by comparing modern and ancient textbooks. While one can define textbooks differently, I will use the term "textbook" (TB) in the sense of "foundational text" as a basic tool for education. Modern TBs are foundational texts in schools, colleges, and universities. Likewise, ancient canonized texts (Iliad, Odyssey, Aeneid, TNK[2]) were foundational in ancient educational setups.[3] As no modern religion or history class is taught without a TB as the most foundational course material, so was no ancient class taught without Homer's epics (in the Greek world), Vergil's Aeneid (in the Roman world), or the TNK (in the Jewish world).

The differences between ancient and modern TBs are stark and have triggered different educational methods. After describing the essential task of Western education ("2. The Idea of Modern/Western Education"), I will describe some of the essential differences between ancient and modern textbooks ("3. Ancient vs. Modern TBs"). This will then allow me to compare

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[1]   This essay is based on my invited lecture at the annual Andrews University Teaching and Learning Conference on March 25, 2021.

[2]   TNK is the abbreviated form of Tanakh which refers to the three major sections of the Hebrew Bible: Torah (Pentateuch), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings).

[3]   Scholarship in ancient and classical literature identify the Bible, the Homeric epics, and Vergil's *Aeneid* as "foundational texts." One of the reasons for such classification is that these works have been used as TBs in ancient schools and educational environments. With the rise of Christianity, the foundational texts of Judaism and the Greek *paideia* were combined within the Christian curriculum. Thus, Vergil, Homer, and the Bible continued to be foundational texts for both the ancient and Christian eras up to the fall of Byzanz in the 15th century. Cf. Margarit Finkelberg, "Canonising and Decanonising Homer: Reception of the Homeric Poems in Antiquity and Modernity," in *Homer and the Bible in the Eyes of Ancient Interpreters*, ed. Maren Niehoff (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 16–20.

the different natures of TBs and identify how they have informed different educational methods ("4. Comparison"). We will see that each method has its advantages and disadvantages. To describe in concrete ways some of the disadvantages that come with modern TBs, I will use examples from typical TBs used in Biblical Theology and Biblical Language classes offered at colleges and seminaries. The insights gained through a comparative analysis of TBs help to see the strengths and weaknesses of modern education and show how they can foster polarization on various fronts. They can also suggest practical implementations of ancient methods within the modern educational setup. To illustrate this, I will provide a concrete example of a restructured Biblical Hebrew language course.

When integrating ancient approaches to education, modern educators can help students not only to perform better but, hopefully, to develop skills with which they can navigate more humbly through the challenges of modern everyday life—a life that steadily grows in complexity.[4]

2. The Idea of Modern/Western Education

There is always the risk of romanticizing the past when one is involved in a critique of present culture. As I try to evaluate modern TBs as a central element of our modern educational strategies by comparing them with ancient TBs, I don't claim that the old times were better than today's times. However, at the same time, most of us consternate that modern (Western) education has failed to achieve what it was supposed to achieve. This becomes visible when we compare the official statements of Western state-governed educational departments about the purpose of education with the present discourse of citizens who were educated in Western institutions. A typical example of a purpose statement of modern education in a democratic society is the "Strukturplan für das Bildungswesen" published by the German Education Commission:

> The comprehensive goal of education is the <u>individual's capacity for individual and social life</u>, understood as his or her ability to realize the freedom and liberties granted and imposed by the constitution…. The fundamental rights mentioned in the Basic Law, which are here representative of all humane fundamental rights, apply to everyone in the same way. <u>Each individual should be able to exercise them and behave</u>

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4 Such a need has been formulated in different ways and formats by educational scholars. See, for example, Christoper P. Long, "The Liberal Arts Endeavor," *The Journal of General Education* 65.3–4 (2016): v–ix.

in such a way that he grants every other member of society the exercise of the same fundamental rights as a matter of course. Thus, fundamental rights also give rise to duties. To enable every citizen to exercise his rights and to fulfill his duties must therefore be the general aim of education, for which the state, next to the parents, must provide.... Learning should promote the whole person. This includes that everyone learns to learn. The social system of learning should lead, in all educational institutions, to the acquisition of the behaviors necessary for living together.[5]

A dedicated Christian version of such a purpose statement is found in article no. 1 of the official educational mission statement of the state of Bavaria:

Schools shall carry out the educational and training mandate enshrined in the Constitution. They shall impart knowledge and skills and educate mind and body, heart and character. The highest educational goals are reverence for God, respect for religious conviction, for human dignity, and for the equal rights of men and women, self-control, a sense of responsibility and a willingness to take responsibility, a willingness to help, an open-mindedness for all that is true, good and beautiful, and a sense of responsibility for nature and the environment. Students are to be educated in the spirit of democracy, in a/the? love for the Bavarian

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[5] The German original: "Das umfassende Ziel der Bildung ist die Fähigkeit des einzelnen zu individuellem und gesellschaftlichem Leben, verstanden als seine Fähigkeit, die Freiheit und die Freiheiten zu verwirklichen, die ihm die Verfassung gewährt und auferlegt…. Die im Grundgesetz genannten Grundrechte, die hier stellvertretend für alle humanen Grundrechte stehen, gelten für alle in gleicher Weise. Jeder einzelne soll sie wahrnehmen können und sich so verhalten, daß er jedem anderen Mitglied der Gesellschaft die Wahrnehmung derselben Grundrechte selbstverständlich zugesteht. Damit ergeben sich aus den Grundrechten auch Pflichten. Jeden Staatsbürger zur Wahrnehmung seiner Rechte und zur Erfüllung seiner Pflichten zu befähigen, muß deshalb das allgemeine Ziel der Bildung sein, für die nächst den Eltern der Staat sorgen muß…. Das Lernen soll den ganzen Menschen fördern. Dazu gehört, daß jeder das Lernen erlernt. Das soziale System des Lernens soll in allen Bildungseinrichtungen dazu führen, daß die für das Zusammenleben erforderlichen Verhaltensweisen erworben werden" (Deutscher Bildungsrat, *Strukturplan Für Das Bildungswesen* [Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1972], 29–31. My underlining). For a critical reception from a Christian perspective see Ulrich Becker, *Hoffnung für die Kinder dieser Erde: Beiträge für Religionspädagogik und Ökumene* (Münster: LIT Verlag Münster, 2004).

homeland and the German people, <u>and in the spirit of reconciliation among nations</u>.[6]

The current discourse on racial discrimination, tax strategies, ecology, economy, etc., has become utmost dogmatic. This has been well demonstrated in the rhetoric of both candidates and supporters of the 2024 presidential election campaign in the US (Trump vs. Harris). Not only a critical analysis brings this to the floor, but also the popular rhetoric in social media, TV, and radio. For example, there are the "post-Christian Socialists and Marxists" on the one hand and the "White Supremacy Capitalists" on the other hand. As educators, we realize these categorizations are too simplistic and harmful to "the behaviors necessary for living together" (cf. p. 22). Or think of the fan groups surrounding Slavoj Žižek and Jordan Peterson in their public debate.[7] While each of them is a thinker in his own right, highlighting societal problems with precision, their respective following often creates the impression that a good amount has allowed themselves to be indoctrinated. One would expect that such indoctrination would happen less were the followers to realize that the precision of problem descriptions by Žižek or Peterson (and any thinker, for that matter) is usually gained by reducing the complexity of the matters discussed.

Interpretative simplification is a general psychological survival strategy. But while this is undoubtedly true, it becomes a dangerous threat to the fabric of societal peace. It is the call of modern democratic education to prevent simple truths that stimulate radicalization but, instead foster the development of a skillset that resists the temptation of doctrinal thinking on the one hand and the ever-increasing temptation of agnostic comforts on the other hand.[8] I claim that the educational system has not performed at its best because of how it relates to doctrinal thinking. Such a critical perspective is

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[6]   The original: "Die Schulen haben den in der Verfassung verankerten Bildungs- und Erziehungsauftrag zu verwirklichen. Sie sollen Wissen und Können vermitteln sowie Geist und Körper, Herz und Charakter bilden. Oberste Bildungsziele sind Ehrfurcht vor Gott, Achtung vor religiöser Überzeugung, vor der Würde des Menschen und vor der Gleichberechtigung von Männern und Frauen, Selbstbeherrschung, Verantwortungsgefühl und Verantwortungsfreudigkeit, Hilfsbereitschaft, Aufgeschlossenheit für alles Wahre, Gute und Schöne und Verantwortungsbewusstsein für Natur und Umwelt. Die Schüler sind im Geist der Demokratie, in der Liebe zur bayerischen Heimat und zum deutschen Volk und im Sinn der Völkerversöhnung zu erziehen." See https://www.gesetze-bayern.de/Content/Document/BayEUG-1. My underlining.

[7]   See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peterson-Žižek_debate.

[8]   Cf. Andreas Dörpinghaus, Andreas Poenitsch, and Lothar Wigger, *Einführung in die Theorie der Bildung* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2008), 54–65.

made possible when comparing ancient TBs with their modern counterparts.

3. Ancient vs. Modern TBs

3.1 The Modern TB

A typical modern TB contains text-book specific ingredients:

1. *Table of Contents*
2. *Books are pedagogically organized in chapters*:
   This means that the order of chapters follows a logical structure. Each chapter builds on the insights of the previous chapter(s).
3. *Chapters are organized with a specific simple architecture*:
   a. *Introduction:* Modern TBs never go *in medias res*. They always provide an introduction to prepare the student's mind to "land softly" in the material before him.
   b. *Mind-sensitive chunking*: Each chapter is further divided into chunks of information that the mind can efficiently process. It is, in a sense, mentally predigested food. For example, a TB on Homer's epics will interpret in a summarized fashion its primary source (Iliad, Odyssey), while a TB on OT theology will summarize certain topics and ideas entertained in the TNK and interpret them for the reader. To use a different metaphor: modern TBs offer a topographic map for the topography of their primary data. The routes found on the topographic map are doctrinal in nature, i.e., interpretative conclusions. While the conclusions might be right (or wrong), as such, they are not offering "orientation skills" that help to walk one's own way in a landscape that contains a significant amount of underdetermined data (what something means is not always obvious and requires interpretative subjective involvement).[9] Of course, there are good exceptions. Some textbooks are intentional with having their readers navigate the presented materials without a biased mind.

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[9]   As a general phenomenon see Klaus Brinker, *Linguistische Textanalyse Eine Einführung in Grundbegriffe Und Methoden* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2010), 12–15, 39–40. In relation to the TNK see John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 198–219.

    c. *Summary/Conclusion*: Once the student has processed the predigested "food," he is exposed to a summary of the mental food provided. Here the highest of all abstraction levels is being found: it is the "menu."

    d. *Discussion Questions and Exercises*: Finally, most modern TBs present questions and exercises at the end of a chapter to deepen one's understanding of the presented conclusions and confirm the concepts taught.

After having worked through a TB, the good student may experience a certain clarity and mastery of the source text (e.g., Bible, Vergil's *Aeneid*) the TB sought to discuss. However, the achieved clarity and sense of mastery often turn out as illusionary once the students get an unfiltered exposure to the actual source. As an example, the topics "obedience" and "salvation" are an integral part of any Christian OT theology TB.[10] Integrating the "Binding of Isaac" (Gen 22) when discussing "salvation" and "obedience" is common in TBs. The careful reader will learn that Isaac is a type for Christ's death at the cross, while Abraham is an example of radical obedience. The student can reproduce this argumentative chain and receive "clarity" on this challenging text. However, when the student reads the actual narrative account in Gen 22, he finds himself confused as he cannot easily make sense of its composition, nor can he easily recognize how the TB's argumentative line about "Abraham's obedience" can be traced in the actual narrative.[11] The primary text seems to be so much more complex than the TB he has read about it.[12] The disconnect between TB and source text also becomes obvious by the simple fact that in biblical scholarship, research on

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[10]   For example, Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 336–38, or Gordon Wenham, *A Guide to the Pentateuch*, vol. 1 of *Exploring the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 44.

[11]   This confusion has been worked out well in Omri Boehm, *The Binding of Isaac: A Religious Model of Disobedience*, Library of Biblical Studies (New York: T&T Clark, 2007) and more recently in J. Richard Middleton, *Abraham's Silence The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 129–226.

[12]   This disconnect has been famously worked out in Auerbach's "Odysseus' Scar," in Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature: Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3–23.

the "Binding of Isaac" is still ongoing.[13] To use another metaphor: The *real* text does not know of mental "fast food" nor provides directions for convenient mental "drive-ins." Cognitive convenience is not a feature of ancient TBs. However, the "raw" text is not a desert void of food and vegetation. It's full of delicious fruits and nutritious vegetables waiting to be harvested. However, modern TBs do not primarily focus on developing harvesting skills—they instead focus on food delivery. It's not about how to develop doctrines but about how to defend acclaimed doctrines.[14]

3.2 Another example: Biblical Hebrew TB

A second example from the world of Biblical Hebrew TBs can further illustrate the symptomatic challenge of modern TBs, more specifically, Biblical Hebrew TBs used in today's colleges and universities in the US. While a modern theology TB will focus on doctrines, a modern Biblical Hebrew TB will focus on paradigms. These paradigms come in different versions, some color-coded, some in well-organized tables. What they all have in common is that they show inner consistency and can, therefore, be easily learned.

The table below shows in the left column the paradigm of the Hebrew strong verbs in the hofal stem (in *qatal*/perfect tense). It's always the prefix הָ֯ that distinguishes it from all the other stems. But when looking up all strong verbs of this *hofal* stem (right column) it becomes visible that the paradigm does not accurately describe the textual/linguistic reality.

The issue here is that the paradigm suggests that the *hofal qatal*/perfect prefix of the regular verb always looks like this: הָ֯. The linguistic reality, however, knows of a paradigmatic variation: הָ and הֳ֯. While some TBs mention this deviation as a side note, many TBs do not.[15] Even when noted, the impression is being created that this deviation (הָ instead of הֳ֯) is not

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13   For example, Arlyn Sunshine Drew, "A Hermeneutic for the Aqedah Test: A Way beyond Jon Levenson's and Terence Fretheim's Models" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2020), https://doi.org/10.32597/dissertations/1719.

14   I am not overlooking the fact that there are also courses offered that focus on the art of interpretation (hermeneutics, exegesis, etc.). But even there, I would argue, we find often similar problems. More time is spent with TBs than with working with real and raw texts.

15   For example, the widely adopted Page Kelley TB does not mention the deviation but rather states, "All Hof'al perfects are prefixed with הָ (he plus qames-hatuf)" (Kelley and Crawford, *Biblical Hebrew*, xiv, 37). This TB is the basic Biblical Hebrew TB at Andrews University and many other Adventist religion departments and seminaries in the English-speaking world.

worth much of our attention as the paradigm should be taken as representative of what we find in the biblical text. However, the reality is that we have a ratio of 9/5 (הָ/הֳ). Thus, more than 1/3 of all cases deviate from the paradigm as it is commonly presented. This is not an exceptional case. Countless examples of similar nature could be given.

Table 1: The Hofal stem in TB and the BHS.

Paradigm[16]	Reality			
Hofʻal	**n**	**p**	**book**	**word**
——	1	Leviticus 5:23	Leviticus	הָפְקַד
הָשְׁמַר	2	1 Samuel 25:15	1_Samuel	הָכְלְמָנוּ
הָשְׁמְרָה	3	Isaiah 14:19	Isaiah	הָשְׁלַכְתָּ
הָשְׁמַרְתָּ	4	Jeremiah 6:6	Jeremiah	הָפְקַד
הָשְׁמַרְתְּ	5	Jeremiah 14:3	Jeremiah	הָכְלְמוּ
הָשְׁמַרְתִּי	6	Jeremiah 22:28	Jeremiah	הֻשְׁלְכוּ
הָשְׁמְרוּ	7	Ezekiel 19:12	Ezekiel	הֻשְׁלְכָה
הָשְׁמַרְתֶּם	8	Ezekiel 32:32	Ezekiel	הֻשְׁכַּב
הָשְׁמַרְתֶּן	9	Psalms 22:11	Psalms	הָשְׁלַכְתִּי
הָשְׁמַרְנוּ	10	Job 5:23	Job	הָשְׁלְמָה־
	11	Daniel 4:33	Daniel	הָתְקְנַת
	12	Daniel 6:24	Daniel	הֻסַּק
	13	Daniel 8:11	Daniel	הֻשְׁלַךְ
	14	Daniel 9:1	Daniel	הָמְלַךְ

As a result, Hebrew TB students are not necessarily students of the Hebrew text. They learn idealized forms of the linguistic datum. They might get an "A" for reproducing TB paradigms correctly, efficiently, and effectively, but when they have to translate a concrete OT text, they often struggle.

For the mind, narrow paradigmatic thinking is convenient since the morphological rules are consistent and follow an internal logic. However, once

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16   The example is taken from "Verb Chart I: Strong Verb" in Page H. Kelley and Timothy G. Crawford, *Biblical Hebrew: An Introductory Grammar*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 400.

students are exposed to the actual linguistic datum, they struggle to match their idealized forms with what they find in the linguistic datum. At the seminary at Andrews University I have often had students confess: "I have received an "A" for all my Greek and Hebrew classes, but I cannot translate Hebrew and Greek texts." Professors of Biblical studies recognize this as a more general phenomenon among the student body. Students, then, are made fit for the doctrinal world. They can classify and categorize paradigmatic forms, but those doctrines do not fit the real world, be that world the linguistic datum, a primary text, or the life of an individual.

3.2 Ancient TBs

Unlike modern TBs, the typical TBs of ancient times do not contain tables of contents, introductions, summaries, exercises, or convenient text divisions. Some of this has to do with the fact that book production was a very costly and labor-intensive enterprise. The material costs were immense, and the human labor was very demanding as everything got manually copied. For cost-saving purposes, empty space was kept at a minimum, as the table with images of the oldest discovered versions of ancient canonical text demonstrates below.

As one can see, except for the Hebrew text (TNK), all Latin (Aeneid) and Greek scripts (Iliad, Odyssey) don't have spacing between words. Thus, there are no graphical markers for word beginnings and endings. Also, often, no visual markers/punctuation for clause beginnings and clause endings are present. Punctuation is also not required for most (ancient and modern) languages when a fully developed morphology is present. If one knows Latin or Greek morphology well, one can identify syntactical subjects (in nominative case), syntactical objects (in accusative case), syntactical indirect objects (in dative/ablative case), and predicates (morphologically identifiable).[17]

Due to the lack of punctuation and—in many cases—word divisions, reading becomes more difficult and requires good language skills. But this is not the only difficulty. While modern TBs are written in a language and a vocabulary that the learner is acquainted with, these ancient TBs are *Traditionsliteratur* (except for the *Aeneid*). Thus, their texts contain vocabulary and language characteristics from different periods and locations. The rich history of their language development has been deposited within their literature.

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[17]   Since Hebrew does not have a morphologically based case system, phrase functions cannot always be identified easily, making spacing between the words necessary.

*Table 2: Images of Texts from ancient TBs*
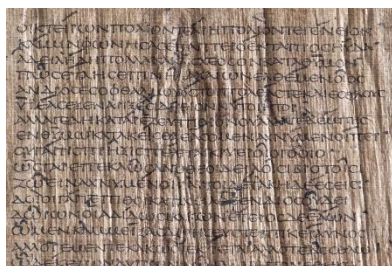
Iliad:[18]	Hebrew Bible:[19]
Odyssey:[20]	Codex Sinaiticus:[21]

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[18] Papyrus 114 is one of the oldest Iliad fragments of the 2nd century. The image shows parts of Iliad 24.127–804. The manuscript can be viewed at OMNIKA Foundation Contributors. "Papyrus 114 / The Bankes Homer." Las Vegas, NV: OMNIKA Foundation. Created June 8, 2019. Accessed Nov 1, 2024. https://omnika.org-/stable/161. OMNIKA provides open-access to ancient resources and data (https://om-nika.org/datastore).

[19] The first verses of the book of Isiah as found in 1QIsa (the Great Isiah scroll). The scroll is dated to the 2nd century BC. A high resolution photocopy of the fragment is available (public domain) on Wikimedia: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Great_Isaiah_Scroll.jpg (accessed Nov 1, 2024).

[20] The selection shows parts of the oldest found papyrus manuscript containing the Odyssey (showing book IX and X). The fragment is dated to the 3rd century BC. A high resolution photocopy of the fragment is available (public domain) on Wikimedia: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ende_Johannesevangelium.jpg (accessed Nov 1, 2024). The entire codex can be studied at https://codexsinaiticus.org/.

[21] The selection shows the end of the gospel of John. The codex is dated to the 4th century AD. A high resolution photocopy of the fragment is available (Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license) on Wikimedia: https://commons.wi-ki-media.org/wiki/File:Fragment_Odyssee_2245.jpg (accessed Nov 1, 2024).https://co-dex-sinai-ticus.org/.

Aeneid:[22]
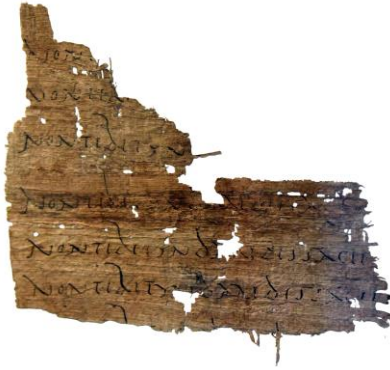
We, therefore, find plene (דויד) and defective (דוד) writings in Hebrew, verbal forms (*qal* passive) that are no longer in use by the post-exilic readers.[23] The Hebrew of Daniel is different from the Hebrew of Genesis. This is even more true for the Homeric epics, where we do not find a homogeneous language not even within each epic. In contrast, different Greek dialects (Spartan, Athenian) are used in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.[24] The TNK and Homer's epics use many archaic formulations that did not appear in the common language practice of the ancient students. Most of the language used in those TBs is already outdated for ancient readers. It felt like reading the original Shakespeare when reading the TNK or the *Odyssey*. This all meant that reading and understanding took much more time in ancient education.

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[22]   The photograph shows the oldest found fragment (Hawara Papyrus 24) of Virgil's *Aeneid* (book II, line 601) from the 1st century AD. A high resolution photocopy of the fragment is available (Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license) on Wikimedia: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hawara_Papyrus_24,_with_line_of_Virgil%27s_Aeneid_repeated_7_times,_Book_2,_line_601._Recto._Latin_language._1st_century_CE._From_Hawara,_Egypt._On_display_at_the_British_Museum_in_London.jpg (accessed Nov 1, 2024).

[23]   Cf. Ronald Hendel and Jan Joosten, *How Old Is the Hebrew Bible?: A Linguistic, Textual, and Historical Study*, Bilingual edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 2–4.

[24]   Wilson writes that the "language is a mishmash of several different dialects" and that "Homer's language … is always a mixture of words and phrases from many different dialects and periods" (Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson [New York: Norton, 2018], 11, 72).

The missing subchapters, introductions, summaries, and exercises in these TBs meant that these texts could not be easily appropriated and understood. Therefore, the student of ancient TBs always first started with memorization of the text. The ability to read was not a requirement to access the blessings of education. More fundamental than reading and writing was memorization. We know that most portions of the Torah, *Odyssey*, *Iliad*, or *Aeneid* were learned by heart as a preparation for learning, reading, and interpretation.[25]

Memorization came before text interpretation. Or, to formulate it differently: To a great extent, learning did not start with doctrines and paradigms but with text appropriation. I see this as one of the key distinctions between the pedagogical frameworks surrounding ancient and modern TBs.

4. Comparison

The textual differences in form and organization between ancient and modern TBs translate into pedagogical techniques when it comes to the process of education. The table below seeks to summarize these differences. It is, however, important to mention that not all academic disciplines show the same stark contrast between ancient and modern TBs. Ancient and modern TBs for legal studies, architecture, or mathematics looked more similar to their modern counterpart than those for studies in history, literature, religion, or philosophy.[26]

The table below indicates that the ancient approach is characterized by intrinsic humility. This is because its TBs require constant revisitation—not to memorize concepts about the text but to continue working on the neverending task of understanding the text that is known. This is because

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[25] The practice of memorizing the Homeric epics in the ancient world is well documented through various accounts and analyses of oral traditions. The Perseus Encyclopedia explains that "The Homeric epics ultimately were memorized as precisely as any religious text" (https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hop-per/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0004:entry=homer). See also Saccheri P, Travan L, Crivellato E., "The Cerebral Cortex and the Songs of Homer: When Neuroscience Meets History and Literature," *The Neuroscientist* 30.1 (2024):17–22, doi:10.1177/10738584221102862.

   The memorization of larger portions of the Torah has been a fundamental aspect of Jewish education and tradition throughout history. See Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE– 400 CE* (Oxford: University Press, 2001).

[26] For example, ancient TBs in mathematics used also exercise sections. See David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 21, 85.

Table 3. Summary of Ancient and Modern TB Differences

Ancient	Modern
The ancients start with the most difficult: the un-abridged, un-simplified, un-summarized, and un-concluded text.	The modern start with the ends: an abridged, commented, summarized, and concluded reader.
The ancient student starts with memorizing major parts of the text.	The modern student ends with memorizing (if at all) selected passages or paradigms that are considered elementary.
The ancient student develops his insights and mental abstractions after he knows the text.	The modern student believes in understanding the text when he has learned paradigms and doctrines about the text.
The ancient student is aware of the gap between his knowing (of the text) and his understanding (concepts, paradigms, doctrines). He knows that he knows more than what he understands.	The modern student is much less aware of the gap between understanding and knowing. He often owns less knowledge than "understanding": He "understands" more than what he knows.
The knowing–understanding gap translates into a fruitful tension as it requires a constant revisitation of the text/reality to test and recalibrate once understanding. The text/reality is always ahead. And since all students know the text, they can supervise their own understanding process.	The knowing-understanding gap does not easily stimulate humility but can contribute to the depreciation and deconstruction of the canonical nature of their source text (e.g. *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, Torah, *Aeneid*). There tends to be more epistemological authority assumed in one's understanding than in the actual text.[27] A deeper understanding of

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[27] Often one of the main reasons for canonization processes of texts is that a community assumes that the canonized text contains a richness that cannot be exhausted by human epistemic activity and should, therefore, be protected from deconstructive forms of criticism. This is one of the main reasons for why allogrization became such an important tool for the canonization of Homer's epics (and later the Bible). See Margarit Finkelberg, "Canonising and Decanonising Homer: Reception of the Homeric Poems in Antiquity and Modernity," in *Homer and the Bible in the Eyes of Ancient Interpreters*, ed. Maren Niehoff (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 16, 18–19. A healthy balance needs to be sought when approaching the learning object. Both the development of a critical mind and a humble spirit are needed.

> the text is often sought in reading another TB that takes a different perspective.

more truth-authority is located in the actual text than in the doctrines/paradigms derived from it. This foundational formal difference of ancient TBs (in contrast to modern TBs) communicates to the ancient learner that his interpretations are always only aspectual and reductionistic. The text is always truer than its interpretation. While the modern student is taught to use his TB as a means to shed light on the actual source text (*Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, TNK), his TBs run the risk of functioning as the actual authority over the source text. In contrast, ancient TBs remain a source of confusion and, therefore, a constant reminder that one's doctrines, concepts, or paradigms derived from these texts are not to be considered final and, thus, cannot claim ultimate authority. On a fundamental level, it is the ancient TB that sheds light on one's ideas about it, not the other way around.

5. Incorporating Elements of Ancient Education

With the above comparison as a critical lense, we can learn for the college setting of the 21st century. A complex growing world requires, first and foremost, a better knowledge of the world before we seek to organize our lifestyles, political choices, religious beliefs, and social engagements by our understanding of the world. In the context of religious Christian education more work with the actual OT and NT texts can help to develop a better sense of the gap between source and interpretation.

Having general aim of Western education in mind (cf. pp. 21–23), a critical and humble assessment of our paradigms and doctrines/understandings is only possible when we know *more* of the "text" of life. As we have seen, the ancient TB is much more a form of *in medias res*, where *res* is a portrayal of life rather than a paradigmatic summary of it. The object of learning is contained in the actual TB. In contrast, in modern forms of education, the object of learning is usually found outside the TB (see 4. Comparison). This fundamental difference allows us to rethink how we want to approach the ultimate learning object, "life." If my comparative observations can be used to reflect modern education critically, I suggest that we need more exposure to the *datum* of life before involving ourselves in paradigmatic interpretation. This can mean that we need to experience more the actual lives of blacks, Asians, immigrants, the real lives of the disadvan-

taged blue-collar world, and multimillionaire philanthropists. More exposure to the experience of the religious Muslim, the agnostic life, the atheistic humanist, meritism in its failed and successful variants, the disadvantaged life of women, and the competitive life of men, etc.… We need more exposure to the *text of life* than exposure to our interpretations and paradigms. Once our memorization of whatever text has become rich, i.e. once we have developed an ample knowledge of the learning object, we have developed the necessary epistemological humility to develop perspectives that correspond better—but always and only in relative ways—with the text/source, i.e. learning object, we engage with.

5.1 An Example in Teaching Biblical Hebrew

The comparative insights between ancient and modern TBs and their corresponding pedagogical methodologies can be made fruitful for teaching several subject matters in the 21st century. I demonstrate this by using a concrete university course as an example: Biblical Hebrew language. I will show how I have integrated insights about ancient TBs and ancient education into my teaching of Biblical Hebrew in the concrete university setting of Andrews University.

First, instead of using a typical Biblical Hebrew TB as the basis for my teaching, I use the "raw" (instead of simplified or "cleaned" from difficulties) biblical Hebrew text. From the first day, the student is put *in medias res*. That means the student works with actual biblical Hebrew texts for the entire course. Thus, a *corpus-driven* approach is chosen. We are not doing a "proof-text" reading in which we translate only texts that confirm our grammatical training. Instead, entire narratives are being read and translated. This means that students do not learn abstract vocab lists and abstract grammar. Typical vocabulary lists contain the most frequently appearing words in the Hebrew Bible but do usually not contain words that actually appear in a concrete biblical Hebrew text that is to be translated.

Second, by choosing a corpus-driven approach, I replaced the classical Biblical Hebrew TB with van der Merwe's *Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*.[28] This grammar is used by many Bible translators, exegetes, and Hebrew scholars who work with the biblical Hebrew text regularly. Since this grammar is not written with pedagogy in mind, it cannot be used in class as

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[28]   Christo H. J. Merwe van der, Jacobus A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017).

a typical modern Biblical Hebrew TB is used, i.e., starting with the first chapter and progressing through the book until the course is completed with the last chapter. Instead, different grammar sections are incorporated in a non-linear order with each lecture. Each week, more paragraphs from different sections of the grammar will be studied. At the end of all Hebrew courses, most of the grammar has been read and studied. In contrast to standard Hebrew TBs, whose useability as a reference work is very low, the Hebrew reference grammar can continue its purposeful life as an excellent reference in the work of the future translator, scholar, or pastor.

Consequently, I have moved away from such primarily frequency-based vocab lists, and instead, students now learn all the vocab that appears in the texts they work on within a given course. Now, each word they learn appears several times in the text they translate. This allows for instant gratification as the students see that the words they are learning are relevant to the narrative they read and do not remain words on an abstract vocabulary list that do not appear in the texts they translate. The same applies not only to vocabulary but also to grammar (morphology, syntax, and text-grammar). Students learn those grammar concepts that are necessary for making progress in the reading and translating of the texts they work with. With the help of databases and a Python-based research environment (Text-Fabric[29]), it is possible to find narratives that contain a high density of high-frequency words and all major grammatical concepts. In this way, narratives can be translated that do not contain too many deviations and exceptions from general grammatical rules. As a result, my text selection choice is Gen 19–20, Ruth 3, Ps 3.

Third, without exercises, learning cannot take place. Since a typical modern TB has been removed, exercises and assignments that would otherwise come with each TB chapter are missing. Instead, the BibleOnlineLearner (BOL) is employed (https://learner.bible/) allowing for flexible corpus/data-driven exercise production. The BOL makes exercise creation of any sort easy: vocabulary, morphology, syntax. The screenshots below show samples of BOL exercises that are built around Gen 19–20, Ruth 3, and Ps 3.

All exercises present the *real forms* that appear in the *real text*. Thus, word forms that might deviate from the standard paradigms found in TBs are presented to the student together with the "perfect" paradigmatic forms.

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[29]   See https://github.com/annotation/text-fabric.

Table 4. Screenshots of BOL exercises.

Therefore, initially, these exercises are slightly more difficult than TB exercises as they are not paradigmatically "cleaned." The advantage, however, is that students quickly learn the bandwidth of paradigmatic deviation and are no longer puzzled by unexpected forms.

Fourth, with BOL, I can automatically grade/provide feedback for each single exercise.[30] Students can look up their scores for each exercise run:

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30   To ensure that students stay motivated through the semester, I distribute the final grade weight unevenly throughout the 16 weeks of a semester. While the total weight of the graded exercises in the 1st week is 1%, the weight increases per week up to 16%

Figure 1. Performance Recording in BOL.

Grades for exercise "TOHFL/exams/course-1_exam_1_midterm-material_01_vocabulary_Gen19-20_full-pool"

Student	Date	Correct	Grade	Total time (s)	Avrg. time/question (s)	
Student Glanz (Best Run)	2025-01-16 23:44:18	100%	100%	46	3.0	Hide Det.
Student Glanz	2025-01-16 23:40:22	80%	80%	53	5.0	
Student Glanz	2025-01-16 23:39:46	33%	33%	20	12.0	

In addition, students can look up their right/wrong answers to learn from their mistakes in Figure 2. Using algorithms and databases allows students to take each exercise as often as they want until the deadline set by the teacher. Grading only the best run stimulates students to repeat exercises until the material is mastered. The example above (Figure 1) shows how a student took an exercise 3 times and improved both on the percentage of right answers as well as on the speed used to produce the right answer.

Consequently, students do not operate under fear of failure but fully control their own performance. Importantly, each time the student redoes the exercise, he will be presented with new forms, vocab, or syntax. Redoing each exercise is not a revisitation of the same questions but of the same difficulty. The difficulty increases throughout the course until the student can master all variations of the entire spectrum of grammatical forms.[31]

While such a corpus-driven approach is much more challenging for the first weeks of a typical language course, students start to excel after a few weeks have passed. While a standard modern TB approach usually never exposes the student to several complete Hebrew narratives and poems, my students have translated up to 8 chapters of Hebrew texts by the end of a typical Hebrew II course.[32]

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in the final week. This means that students doing very well in the first half of the semester might still be at risk of failing the class if they do not keep up with the course. It also means that students who have struggled in the first half of the course can still turn their fate in the second half to receive a high final course grade.

[31] While we encounter text-critical problems and discuss them (erroneous forms, copying mistakes, wrong spelling, etc.), I do remove dubious text-critical cases from the exam materials.

[32] At least 2–3 chapters are randomly (even for me as teacher) picked in class and translated at the spot. In this way student build confidence in that the actually have learned biblical Hebrew and not just paradigms of a TB.

Figure 2. Exercise Details shown in BOL.

Exercise Detail

Question Number	Feature Location	Text	Question Object		Right/Wrong	Correct Answer	Student's Answer
1	Genesis, 20, 9	וַיִּקְרָא אֲבִימֶלֶךְ לְאַבְרָהָם	Lexeme (with variant): קרא |	Stem: qal	1	call, meet; read (aloud)	call
2	Genesis, 20, 9	וַיִּקְרָא אֲבִימֶלֶךְ לְאַבְרָהָם	Stem: NA	Lexeme (with variant): אַבְרָהָם	1	Abraham	Abraham
1	Genesis, 20, 7	כִּי־נָבִיא הוּא	Stem: NA	Lexeme (with variant): נָבִיא	1	prophet	prophet
1	Genesis, 19, 9	וַיִּגְּשׁוּ לִשְׁבֹּר הַדָּלֶת:	Stem: qal	Lexeme (with variant): נגש	1	draw near, approach	draw near
2	Genesis, 19, 9	וַיִּגְּשׁוּ לִשְׁבֹּר הַדָּלֶת:	Stem: NA	Lexeme (with variant): דֶּלֶת	1	door	door
1	Genesis, 19, 19	אָנֹכִי לֹא אוּכַל לְהִמָּלֵט הָהָרָה	Stem: NA	Lexeme (with variant): אָנֹכִי	1	I	I
2	Genesis, 19, 19	אָנֹכִי לֹא אוּכַל לְהִמָּלֵט הָהָרָה	Stem: qal	Lexeme (with variant): יכל	0	be able, endure, prevail	able
3	Genesis, 19, 19	אָנֹכִי לֹא אוּכַל לְהִמָּלֵט הָהָרָה	Stem: nif	Lexeme (with variant): מלט |	0	escape	flee
4	Genesis, 19, 19	אָנֹכִי לֹא אוּכַל לְהִמָּלֵט הָהָרָה	Stem: NA	Lexeme (with variant): הַר |	1	mountain, mountain range	mountain
1	Genesis, 20, 10	וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִימֶלֶךְ אֶל־אַבְרָהָם	Stem: NA	Lexeme (with variant): אַבְרָהָם	1	Abraham	Abraham

    The success of such an approach has also been measured objectively (see Figure 4 below). The three lines represent three different teaching methods. "Immersion" represents the language immersion approach (students learn to develop conversational Hebrew in class). "Classical" represents the classical TB approach, where the course goes through the different chapters of a TB. "Text-driven" represents the text-driven approach as outlined above. Students of each approach took the same qualifier exam. This paper-based exam consisted of 40 questions and tested vocabulary, morphology, and syntax. All questions were multiple-choice-based. A variation of ten exams (all consisting of 40 questions and having the same difficulty level) was used

Figure 4. Performance Comparison of Hebrew Teaching Approaches.

Student Performance Comparison

Immersion (avg.: 76.35%/100%)   Classical (avg.: 74.73%/100%)   Text-Driven (avg.: 87.86%/100%)
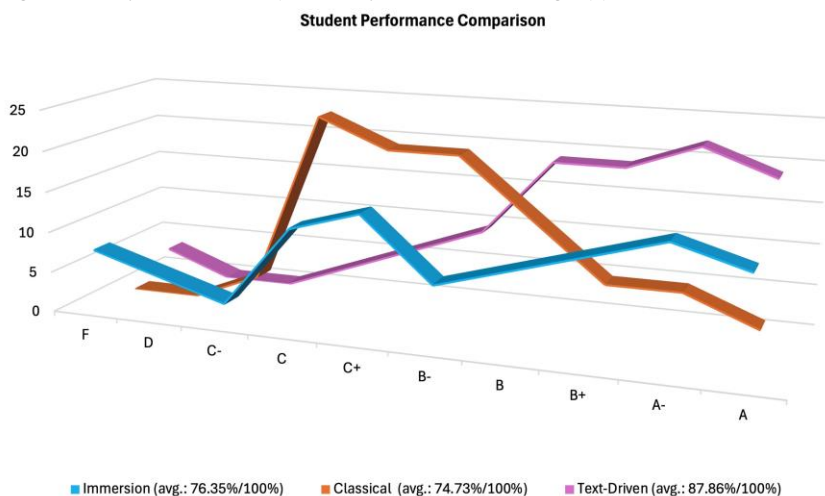
over the course of 20+ years. Each semester, students who wanted to pass the Hebrew II course needed to take this qualifier exam. In the syntax section, the qualifier contained three Hebrew texts that had to be translated. Thus, one could easily compare the language proficiency of the students taking a typical TB approach, an alternative immersion approach, and those taking a corpus-driven approach. Students of the corpus-driven approach performed, on average, 11% better than those students taking a TB approach. This, however, is only half of the truth. In addition to higher scores, students of the corpus-driven approach finish their exam in 30–50% less time than the TB students. They can maneuver quicker and easier through real Hebrew text since their minds can handle not only idealized paradigmatic forms and grammatical concepts but the full bandwidth of real forms as they appear in the Hebrew Bible.

6. Summary

At the beginning of this essay, I noted that our modern educational strategies have not lived up to their mission. Students and graduates contribute to the polarization found in social, political, and religious debates. Part of this concerns how paradigms, doctrines, and understanding are approached in modern education. Much of our present polarization in society in general, and church communities in specific, is due to idolizing doctrines/paradigms/understanding. The integration of ancient educational

methods can help make the gap between the knowledge of a text (as a metaphor for any object of study) and its understanding more visible. With the humility that grows out of this gap experience (knowing > understanding, rather than understanding > knowing), a skillset is built that allows interpreting texts (and reality as The Text) in more empathic and passionate ways. At the same time, this gap experience clarifies that agnosticism is not an alternative way of living as it shies away from engaging responsibly with reality. Paradigms and doctrines are necessary and helpful as long as they are not idolized.

This conclusion is, however, not complete without recognizing the continued importance modern TBs must play. In a world where information grows exponentially, the modern student does not have the luxury of always exposing himself to primary data first. He often must seek shortcuts. While TBs provide excellent time savings, they need to be used carefully. Both students and instructors must constantly remind themselves and others that the real and raw text is more true and complex than the understanding of it.

Further, the value of modern TBs is also found in the critical perspectives and interpretative questions they offer to the student. With skilled teachers in the classroom, developing critical thinking does not have to rely on TBs. However, in a digital world where asynchronous learning increases and, with it, the hours of student-instructor encounters are reduced to a minimum, high-quality modern TBs will play an increasingly important role.

Finally, for some subject matters, like language learning, modern advances in digital humanities make it possible to efficiently implement ancient learning/teaching techniques to develop interpretation skills. Due to the very nature of conventional TBs, such skills cannot be taught with them.