

# Technology-Augmented Seminary Teaching: Enhanced Biblical Studies at VTS in the 2020s

By Stephen L. Cook, Ph.D.

*Catherine N. McBurney Professor of Old Testament Language and Literature*



PHOTO: BRIAN MAZE

**This article includes video supplements, shared via QR codes. Please use your cell phone camera to engage with this media.**

For twenty-five years, since joining the Virginia Seminary faculty in 1996, I have worked to intensify student engagement with biblical study. My ideal teaching scenario has been creating a true community of learners in my classes. In such a community, the subject matter, not the professor, is the focus of attention. An interactive and multisensory learning environment helps bring the subject matter front and center. Rather than a talking head, the professor is a guide.

In this article, I share some “flipped classroom” pedagogy that I have been using with some success over the last several years. I still offer most of the content of my courses in-person, face-to-face. In addition, for many of my courses, I offer other chunks of content “flipped.” That means that the content is available prior to class in an augmented format on Vimeo and on Brightspace, the Seminary’s online learning management software. Conversely, the work of deepening comprehension, traditionally done at home, is “flipped” up into classroom time, where classmates can join in group engagement and reflection. In this type of pedagogy, content received outside of the classroom is available “on demand” in a format that can be paused, replayed, queried, and reflected upon. Students come to class sessions already prepared for interpersonal engagement with course material. This is highly beneficial since students recall a great deal of their interpersonal, group engagement with subject matter.

If used correctly, technology accelerates and deepens the quality of student reception of course content. The ever more powerful digital world helps the professor pull students out of boredom into immersion in the biblical world. In the videos included here, you will see how teaching virtually “on-location” is powerfully engaging. Students learn best through experiences, encounters, and when their professor is present personally as their interactive guide.

What impacts us and stays with us longest is our experience, including virtual experience. Direct experience is how we first started learning things as kids. Virtual experiences and virtual expeditions fire the mind and fan the embers of “holy imagination.” Holy imagination, we have now learned, is crucial if we are to awaken seminarians from the slumbers of rationalism, psychologizing, and historicism. What if you could take seminarians directly into a biblical scene, such as the courtyard of High Priest Caiaphas, to experience the setting firsthand? This is where our first virtual video expedition takes us.

Please enjoy the first sample video, which is six minutes long. It is the first film that I assign

my seminar students in BIBL 610, “Monsters, Mayhem, and Messiah.” Just before I enter the scene, Peter walks offscreen to the left, looking confused and distraught (at 00:27 minutes). In the background, the guards warm themselves next to courtyard fires. My hope is that the viewer is immediately immersed in the fraught emotions around Jesus’s confession to Caiaphas that he is the “Son of Man” of Daniel 7, a shocking apocalyptic claim for a human being to make. To intensify the immersion, an early seventeenth-century engraving of “Christ Before Caiaphas” by Hendrick Goltzius is



brought to life, with the high priest crying “Blasphemy!” (at 01:48 minutes). Our expedition then leads us past a sixteenth-century Flemish painting by Simon Bening, with Jesus’s face augmented with 3D animated face geometry (at 02:43 minutes). The missing link connecting Jesus’s words with Caiaphas back to Daniel 7 is found in a Dead Sea Scroll from Cave 4 at Qumran known as 4Q246. We encounter this text in the video (at 03:57 minutes) and are introduced to its reading of the Son of Man as a divine savior. Did you think the OT lacked the idea?

A second sample video from later in my BIBL 610 seminar takes us on an expedition to ancient

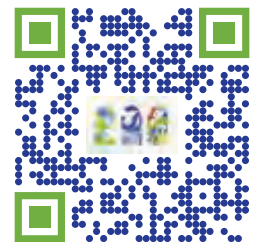
Babylonia, to the base of King Nebuchadnezzar’s towering golden statue. The biblical text at issue is Daniel 3, the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and the fiery furnace. Standing (virtually) beneath the ninety-foot tall statue, we begin to feel its skyscraping effort to link heaven and earth. This court tale does far more than celebrate the piety and faithfulness of three exiled Judeans. It is a sagacious and spiritual exploration of the foolishness of human grandiosity and overreaching. To engage the theological theme, we interact with a sixth-century BCE Babylonian stele showing Nebuchadnezzar himself towering as high as the



ziggurat temple-tower of Babylon, Etemenanki (at 01:06 minutes). The stele, I argue, provides a veritable visual commentary on Daniel 3. Next, we encounter a Mesopotamian cuneiform tablet in the Šumma Ālu divination series (at 01:41 minutes). Wise warnings in this text against exceeding bounds, against grasping preeminence, could (and should!) have been known to Nebuchadnezzar.

The third sample video from the BIBL 610 seminar begins with a dramatic visual and stereo

enactment of the first part of Daniel 7, the dream-vision of the four beasts. In creating the enactment, I drew heavily for inspiration on an etching of the dream of Daniel 7 made by Rembrandt around 1655 CE. As the video proceeds, we explore the etching as a visual commentary on the four apocalyptic beasts (at 02:36 minutes). Rembrandt has even included the little horn atop the fourth monster. Viewers may be startled to see the little horn pop out of the artwork and speak his great boasts (at 06:28 minutes). Shifting to a theological and expository mode, the video turns to the vision of an apocalyptic monster in C.S. Lewis’s children’s novel *The Last Battle*, the final volume of the Narnia series (at 07:42 minutes). The pagan god “Tash” is a composite



monster, an intermixture of beasts just like the creatures of Daniel 7. Viewers encounter him in a series of four “living” images, which I have augmented with an immersive depth dimension (at 09:20 and 09:59 minutes).

The fourth and last sample video from the BIBL 610 seminar takes us on an expedition inside a virtual 3D



world I created out of the 1610 painting “Vize Proroka Ezechiela” [“Vision of the Prophet Ezekiel”], by the Czech artist Jihoněmecká Škola. Stepping inside this dramatic painting of Ezekiel 37 and its massive resurrection of dry bones fans the

embers of the spiritual imagination to help us think theologically about the Christian hope in the general resurrection of the dead. In the Dead Sea Scroll 4Q385 (“Pseudo-Ezekiel”), resurrection in Ezekiel 37 was understood literally, not metaphorically. An image of this startling text fragment pops up, and out, at the viewer (at 03:35 minutes), an encounter sourced from the new Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library. The Levy online resource allows us to interact with antiquity, benefiting from the world’s most advanced imaging technology. A second highly significant scroll fragment from the Levy digital library, 4Q521 (“4Q Messianic Apocalypse”), impacts the viewer half a minute later (at 04:00 minutes).

Daniel 12 uses several idioms and metaphors to elucidate bodily

resurrection, and viewers encounter artworks that pair well with this language to help it do its work. “Closed Eyes” by Odilon Redon (1890) wonderfully illuminates the metaphor of death as “sleep” (at 06:48 minutes). Viewers next encounter the “Retable of the Saint Ines’ Death” as a “living image,” which I have augmented with a depth dimension (at 07:54 minutes). To help explore the metaphor of “dust,” viewers encounter a digitally “awakened” ash drawing by Diane Victor, “Ashes to Ashes” (2015) (at 08:09 minutes). The final minutes of the video bring the discussion forward to constructive and practical theology in the here and now. Dietrich Bonhoeffer appears to help with this (at 14:03 minutes), addressing viewers directly thanks to 3D animated face geometry that I have applied.

(L-R) Editor Scott Tunseth with authors Steven Tuell, Stephen Cook, and John Strong, promoting the release of their book *The Prophets: Introducing Israel’s Prophetic Writings (Introducing Israel’s Scriptures)*. (Fortress Press; March 1, 2022)

