

Opening Credits ([00:01](#)):

Yale Podcast Network.

Credits Voiceover ([00:05](#)):

Welcome to the podcast, a Yale Divinity School podcast series focusing on issues related to religion, culture, and politics. In this episode, Emily Judd interviews Joel Baden, who is Yale Divinity School, professor of Hebrew Bible and the director of the Center for Continuing Education. Professor Baden argues that professors have a responsibility to share their knowledge beyond students in the classroom.

Joel Baden ([00:28](#)):

There's a real service to sort of translating academia into a public discourse.

Credits Voiceover ([00:33](#)):

He defends his critical scholarship of the Bible and speaks out about what he calls scholarly evangelicalism.

Joel Baden ([00:40](#)):

The book Scholarship really does isn't say, here's what everybody else should believe. That's like scholarly evangelicalism in its way.

Credits Voiceover ([00:47](#)):

And Professor Baden reflects on the biggest changes he has witnessed at Yale Divinity School since joining the faculty 17 years ago.

Joel Baden ([00:53](#)):

It's of young, vibrant faculty and it is like blessedly and wonderfully diverse.

Emily Judd ([01:02](#)):

You are the director of the Center for Continuing Education at Yale Divinity School, which offers a wealth of resources, events, online lectures, summer programs, publications that all enable and enrich ministry and lay learning. It was actually founded in 2019 under your leadership and is a great resource I find for alumni like myself who want to continue their learning post degree. So what was the need that you were responding to when you conceived of the idea for this type of center?

Joel Baden ([01:37](#)):

The center is, in my mind at least partially designed for people like you that is alumni who want to continue learning, and partly maybe even mostly designed for people not like you who never had the chance to go to YDS in the first place. The number of people in the world who are interested in the kinds of stuff that we think about and teach about and learn about here vastly outweighs the number of people who could ever possibly attend, whether for space reasons or financial reasons or not living anywhere near here. So the aim of the center really is to sort of turn YDS to face outward, to make available to the public for free as much as possible to make available to everyone, both the knowledge of our faculty, but also the kinds of resources that we've accumulated over the many, many years here without taking away from the experience of the people who do get to be here. Obviously something very special about being at YDS in person, but there's so much benefit to be gained from what this place has to offer, and I feel pretty strongly that everybody should have access to it.

Emily Judd (02:46):

Yeah, I know for me, actually, what I've been using it for is to fill in the gaps for classes that I wasn't able to take when I was a student. So as an alumna, living far from New Haven, and I didn't actually get a chance to take Old Testament interpretation when I was at YDS. So my favorite resource that's been offered by the Center for Continuing Education is the Virtual Bible study, which features these free mini courses with professors like yourself, John Collins. And I'm not alone because the Bible study videos have received over 330,000 views. So I'm wondering what was the impact actually of CID on this virtual Bible study and the center at large? Because I know it was launched pre covid and pre distance learning, but was there a huge spike when Covid happened?

Joel Baden (03:48):

The Bible study videos that you're talking about started well before Covid really, 2012, something like that, maybe even earlier before the Center was founded, we started recording these Yale Bible study videos, these sort of short conversations between faculty members, which are super fun to make and seemed to be really well-liked as you noted. So those were going on with the idea being if you've got, your local church wants to do a Bible study on whatever topic, and here's a resource that you can use to sort of guide your conversations. But other than that, pre covid, everything else was in person. Covid hit pretty soon after the center it launched, 2019 is when it launched, and obviously 2020 is when the world shut down. So simply to have what to do with ourselves, having just started the center, we pivoted pretty hard to putting everything on online. Well, okay, so what if we put the youth ministry lectures? What if we do those online? We've got people from virtually every country that have tuned into something and we can get hundreds of people at events online in a way that we never could in person. So it's been really great. You talked about 330,000 people or whatever it is, watching the Yale Bible studies. Well, that's a lot more people than have ever walked through the doors of YDS.

Emily Judd (05:17):

Speaking of online, Yale Divinity School recently launched its first ever online certification program, which is under the auspices of the Center for Continuing Education. Can you share a little more about that? What is being offered there?

Joel Baden (05:33):

The online certificate program is, this comes out of the Youth Ministry Institute project. The majority, really probably the vast majority of people who in churches who are doing youth ministry are not trained formally in the practice of youth ministry. It's often something that a volunteer on or a part-time clergy person takes on. But there are very few places even in the world really, that do formal training in what matters for youth ministry, the specifics of it as a practice. So we really wanted to fill that void and offer a program that isn't just, well, here's a resource here and there, but is a really thought out in this case year long, deep dive into what it takes to be an effective to run effective youth ministry program. And that includes things like thinking about how church systems work and also thinking about social justice issues and also things like teen and youth psychology. And so all of these relatively complicated issues that actually go into the thing. So the certificate program allows anybody to sign up and get, like I said, a deep dive of learning into the ins and outs of youth ministry. My hope is that we will be developing like a prison ministry certificate program so that again, I mean folks who really don't have the opportunity to be at YDS can still benefit from and get something in writing, not just, I took a course, but a real certificate with interaction with faculty. That really means something.

Emily Judd (07:27):

You've devoted a lot of your time and energy to educating people outside of Yale and outside of academia, let's say. Why is continuing education so important to you personally? The

Joel Baden (07:41):

World of academia is lovely. I make my home here, but it only does a thing academia if it talks to people outside of itself. Otherwise it's just a bunch of nerds sitting in a circle arguing with each other, which is fun. But we really doesn't really move the ball down the field. Speaking to the wider public I think is what gives our work meaning to a certain extent. I can also say I've got, my father worked in continuing education, so it's in my genes as a thing that I think matters, but it's also something that has changed for me over time, I think is often the case. When I first started in academia, I was like, I'm just going to know more about this thing and say neat things and publish books that cost \$150 and nobody can ever read and are full of other languages.

(08:43):

I think a lot of people get into academia, they really love their topic, which is definitely true for me. The reason I do this is because I think that the stuff that I study is super interesting to me, but at a certain point, I don't know, maybe it's post to tenure, but at a certain point it's like, oh, probably there's something more to this than just, it's fun for me. So yeah, I think there's, don't know if it's an obligation. I don't think that everybody has to do it, but I think that those who can and want to, there's a real service to translating academia into a public discourse.

Emily Judd (09:27):

Speaking of what your exact focus is, you're a professor of Hebrew Bible at YDS, and your insights and popular writings have been subject to criticism every now and again. I actually saw one of your responses to a critic on Twitter where you stated, and I can't remember what the exact criticism was, but you stated, I'm a biblical scholar, not a preacher. I don't teach the word, I teach about the word. What is the most challenging part of being a biblical scholar, and what is your response to someone who says that critical biblical scholarship is a threat to faith?

Joel Baden (10:13):

The hardest part is coming up with witty retorts like that as often as I need to.

Emily Judd (10:19):

That's a good

Joel Baden (10:20):

One. No, I dunno. Look, the things I say on Twitter or the things that people, not even the things that I say, the things that other people say on Twitter, I don't know that I'd count them as critics or criticism just because Twitter is a successful of humanity, but it says somebody who's on there. But I would say that one of the real challenges is that people use the Bible in ways that are unlike any other book. I think that's maybe self-evident, but people care about it and people use it as the backstop for whatever it is that they want to be professing in the world. So it doesn't matter whether you're on the right or the left or liberal or conservative or whatever it might be, everybody's like, look, but the Bible upholds my position and they wave a text around or whatever it is.

(11:26):

And what that means is that people are much more attached to what the Bible says or means than any other book, really, probably ever. And I don't know that it's my job to correct anybody and be like, no, it doesn't really say or mean that, but I think it is my job, and this is true when I'm teaching in the classroom

here, it's true when I'm speaking publicly, it's true on Twitter. I think it is my job to be like, actually, everybody's take on the Bible comes from whoever they are. So to anybody who sits up and says, this is what the Bible really means, is really just saying something about themselves more than they're saying something about the Bible. And to your question, which is what my response to people who say that biblical participants is a challenge to faith, it's only a challenge to faith if your faith is deeply contingent on your interpretation of the Bible, not only being right for you, but being right for everyone at all times in all places.

(12:34):

And what biblical scholarship really does isn't say, here's what everybody else should believe. That's like scholarly evangelicalism in its way to say, here's the range of things that it might mean, and here's the range of ways that it has been read, and here's what it might've meant once. And isn't it interesting that that's not what we think it means now, and why is that? With my students here in the introductory class, honestly, if I could boil down the entire year long class to one sentence, it would be as long as you walk out of here recognizing that the things that you think about the Bible or believe about the Bible are more specific to you than to the Bible, then I've basically done my job. The thing I teach most often and most strenuously actually, is like, well, what did the Bible mean when it was written? I teach that stuff because it's like, oh, so you can see that what it meant to its authors or its earliest readers or the context in which it was composed is different from how we take it now. It shouldn't then be like, well, which one of them is right? It's like, oh, I realize that. In fact, that means that what it means is always contextual, and isn't that interesting?

Emily Judd (13:50):

Yeah. I remember actually asking John Collins, professor John Collins, a similar question when we had our first season of the quad cast about if biblical scholarship negatively impacts faith in some way, and I remember he said, it does for people who never investigated their own beliefs basically. So yeah, that's

Joel Baden (14:19):

Your way of saying what I just said. Yeah,

Emily Judd (14:22):

Exactly. If someone's been conditioned or are just parroting something and never investigated it or looked at the historical context, I remember in 2016 when I first joined YDS as a MAR student, we actually watched a lecture series of you speaking about the Babylonian flood story and how it preceded the flood story in the Bible. And actually I was shocked because I really, unfortunately, I had no biblical studies really before, but it just made me want to investigate more. So I think hopefully that's what biblical studies, biblical scholarships should make people want to do. You joined the YDS faculty in 2007 and 17 years later. What is the biggest change that you've witnessed at YDS? The

Joel Baden (15:26):

Biggest change, and quite honestly, the best change is the makeup of the faculty. Now, it's so long ago that I don't know that I could truly recreate what the faculty was exactly like when I got here, but I will say it was, to put it briefly, it was older and it was whiter, and it was probably mailer. And over the last 10 years or so, really the faculty has changed so dramatically. Some of that is just generational. When I came in, there were a lot of older faculty who have retired over the last few years or more. I mean to the point that now I'm something like the fourth or fifth longest tenured faculty member at the institution, which is ridiculous. Not that old. I just happened to have been here a long time, I guess. But it's of young, vibrant faculty, and it is blessedly and wonderfully diverse, which means that the kinds of things that we're teaching and the kinds of experiences that we're having on campus just is so much more interesting. The

faculty now looks more like the student body, which is really good. Yeah, it's a much more vibrant, interesting place. And what I'm about to say really is a generational thing, but the idea of what it is we're doing here has shifted with the younger generation, the kinds of learning that happened, the kinds of styles of teaching, certain dedication to, I mean, I think dedication to the world outside of academia is different now than it was before. So yeah, the faculty is so, so good right now.

Emily Judd ([17:25](#)):

That's great. That's great to hear. And like you said, it's amazing how it's reflective of the student body, which is important. Well, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today. My pleasure.