Alumni
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Alumni Spotlight: Daniel Fleming (MDiv ’85)

Current title: Skirball Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University

Family: Wife: Nancy, Children: Anthony, Elena, & Luc

Favorite professor: Dr. David Wells

Favorite class: The first semester of Systematic Theology

Favorite memory: My best friend during my three years at Gordon-Conwell was Eddie Allen, who became a pastor in the Washington, DC area. He and his circle gave me a vision for what the church could be: faithful, passionate, caring, and smart.

Please tell us about your area of expertise and what courses you teach.

I call myself a “preclassical historian,” a way to combine my work in study of the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) and its context with Assyriology, specializing in second-millennium BCE Syria. I study ancient politics and society, in part looking for new ways to understand ancient Israel.

I teach “ancient Israel,” a Bible (Old Testament) introduction, and mythology to undergraduates and I am at the center of NYU’s doctoral program in (Old Testament) biblical studies, teaching a variety of specialized courses for the preparation of scholars.

How did God weave together your Gordon-Conwell education with other life events to bring you to where you are now?

From Gordon-Conwell, I went to Harvard for doctoral study, always expecting to serve the church directly in a Christian setting. When I finished in 1990, I only had one interview for the new Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University. I got the job as NYU was supporting the creation of a department that would train leading scholars in Jewish studies for the next generations; I happened to arrive just as they started this project.

From the beginning, this job was a true calling and an unexpected change of direction. I understood God to be calling me to the highest level of scholarship, where what I did had to make sense across communities, not just for people of faith. Already in my doctoral study, I had perceived a need for Christians to somehow gain ground in carving out space for understanding the Bible in the world of its making while keeping faith and finding truth. This has been my goal throughout.

In June, my wife Nancy and I will have been married for 44 years. We have been together through all my schooling. Along the way, we adopted three children from rough

urban backgrounds, and the years that followed brought both trauma and good memories. God alone knows what to make of our struggles, but I know that the experience gave me a grasp of worldwide heartbreak beyond what I could ever otherwise have had.

What are some things you love about your roles as a faculty member, professor, and/or researcher?

It turns out that, more than anything, I love to work in close company with people, who share deep care, absolute trust, and endless curiosity. I had no ambition to teach at a research university or to train scholars but working with doctoral students has been one of the greatest gifts of my scholarly life. As of now, I have been the primary advisor for just over 30 students and involved with many more. As I approach retirement, I find myself with a large family of former and current students. Beyond this, I have developed close professional friendships that have opened worlds I would never have known, especially with Sophie Démare-Lafont of the University of Paris law school, with whom I have written scholarly articles and shared family. I hope that retirement opens time for my last big projects before my time runs out. It helps to believe that God will take care of the arrangements.

What are the current challenges of teaching in higher education, being a faculty member in general, and in your context specifically?

I don't know the case in seminaries and Christian higher education, but across our culture, attitudes toward education and truth appear to be changing in ways that are hard for me to evaluate. There is always a danger of older people thinking the world is ending while the young adapt naturally and intelligently to what is new. Across universities, education is being pushed toward the pre-professional, as if ideas have lost their allure. Particularly, what is old carries less and less interest.

For Christians committed to the Bible as God's first way of explaining himself and as the first reference for life, I hope the ancient past keeps its interest. Yet even here, I believe that Christians, in churches and hearing sermons, would gain much from recognizing the wonder of how God could have brought into being a two-part Scripture capable of speaking across more than two thousand years and every world culture. This is history, both the making of the Bible and its keeping through all that time.

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How has your Gordon-Conwell education served you in your academic work?

At intervals, I tell people that the way I learned to read the Bible at Gordon-Conwell still informs the way I teach, both for undergraduates and for doctoral students. In seminary, I learned to listen to the Bible's texts, to wait for God to bring something to my attention that I had not seen at first. With every biblical text, I should never read as if I already understood, or as if there were nothing new to discover, no matter how many times I had seen it before. Also, the Bible's delights are available to all, if we open ourselves to find the unexpected. You don't have to know Hebrew (or Greek), even as more worlds still open up with the ancient languages. For sermons and Christian teaching, we learned that there was a danger of deciding in advance what the message was and then going to look for supporting biblical texts. Gordon-Conwell students, instead, would bring to others what God taught them as they read the Bible. What a powerful way to read—anything, but certainly the Bible.

Also, since you teach at a secular institution—are there ways that your Gordon-Conwell education helped prepare you to work in that environment?

My father was a professor of mathematics at Brown University, and I only became a Christian at university, a shock to my family. The call to NYU re-immersed me in the world of my upbringing, so I was easily at home. It has been a particular gift to have my career in a Jewish setting, especially as a scholar of the Jewish Bible (our Old Testament). Before my arrival at Gordon-Conwell, I had no proper sense of what Christianity is: its long history, its work across the ages, its understanding of where we fit in the world–all its theology. More than anything, the theological training–perhaps surprisingly for people who found theology a chore–prepared me to know where I stood in relation to a world of people with other commitments, or lack of them.

Do you have any publications or links you would like to share?

- Yahweh before Israel: Glimpses of History in a Divine Name
- Democracy's Ancient Ancestors
- Judicial Decisions in the Ancient Near East by Sophie Démare-Lafont, Daniel E. Fleming