

## 2020 SBL Program Unit Application • Comparative Method in Biblical Studies

### 1. Synopsis: (50 word max.)

Comparative Method in Biblical Studies (CMBS) is designed to develop the skill set and critical attention necessary for intellectually and ethically robust approaches to comparison. CMBS examines and critiques approaches to comparative methodology, explores ethical questions, and offers practical suggestions for improving comparison within biblical studies and to other literatures and scriptural traditions.

### 2. Rationale: (500-1,000 words) Explain the unit's work and enduring rationale, uniqueness, and relationship to existing units and discipline as a whole.

#### Work, Rationale & Relation to the Discipline:

Miraculous birth stories, prophetic meetings, divine intervention: these and so many others are discussed across Old and New Testaments and extra-biblical literature on a regular basis despite the fact that these bodies of literature were written and composed at different times and under unique situations, gathered for specific groups, and serve multiple communities. What is the methodological basis for treating them together and when? If we cannot determine a methodology, how do we engage with the growing necessity to teach other scriptural traditions such as the Quran or the Book of Mormon? How can junior scholars working with diverse communities with little scriptural literacy treat these bodies of literature fairly when there is little methodology to compare the Bible with other literatures, whether religious or secular, ancient or modern?

The primary goal of the CMBS session is to create a space in which biblical scholars have the opportunity to discuss the goals, challenges, and ethics of comparison, and to share methods that help navigate this difficult terrain. CMBS fills a gap in the Annual Meeting program and opens a discussion that an increasing number of scholars find wanting in the field of biblical studies at large and in relation to other scriptural traditions. Our aim is not to present, promote, or generate a single way of doing comparison, but to create an ongoing forum in which scholars can discuss strategies and considerations that they find helpful—or problematic—in their own work and in the field generally, thus enhancing professional reflection on the relationship between method and outcome.

We propose this session because the future of the field largely depends on scholars' ability to put the Bible into conversation with other literatures and scriptures. With many theological schools closing or in distress, and many humanities and social sciences divisions downsizing religious studies and related departments, it is now common to see positions that require the ability to teach the Bible comparatively. Simultaneously, there is also a move toward teaching and research that is interdisciplinary, i.e., that takes our individual disciplines and puts it into dialogue with other disciplines in ways that contribute to our ever-expanding understanding of human thought.

In higher education, the days of being able to read the Bible as an insular text are limited. Academic professionals must be able to put the Bible into dialogue with other literatures and scriptures, from ancient to modern. As a professional association, it is the responsibility of SBL to support scholars (especially junior scholars) through changes in the academic landscape, and this session is designed specifically to enhance scholars' fluency with the very method that these changes call for.

One way that the SBL Program Committee can support scholars through this transition is by granting formal time and space in which they can present the research and problem-solving work that is necessary if biblical studies is to persist in an increasingly comparative world. In providing space for biblical scholars to share and discuss their insights on the comparative endeavor, CMBS offers practical opportunities to: 1) further the scholar's ability to gain insight via comparison with other literatures and scriptures, 2) further the scholar's ability to converse with scholars from other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, including but not limited to Assyriology, Egyptology, religious studies, and anthropology, and 3) to do comparison in a way that is ethically and socially responsible.

Finally, the formation of this session is important because the how and why of comparison is intimately connected to questions of how we engage communities other than our own, communities that may or may not exemplify the values or theologies that we ourselves wish to uphold but that we are dedicated to studying, nonetheless. What is at stake in furthering comparative method within the field is not only how we compare the texts, objects, and ideas of others, but how we then represent those others to our intended audience. This requires ethical reflection leading to a set of best-practices or principles that the scholar may then adapt according to the specific needs of their current project. What better place to share these reflections, practices, and principles than the SBL Annual Meeting?

### **Uniqueness & Relationship to Existing Units:**

There are many SBL sessions that include comparative work, such as *Assyriology and the Bible* or *Egyptology and Ancient Israel*, but there has yet to be a recurring session dedicated to the methodological issues of comparison. CMBS fills this gap by showcasing scholarship with a clear focus on method, including case studies designed to illustrate a particular principle. Without a methodological underpinning, such proposals are best suited for another session.

We plan on partnering with established sessions that do comparative work but perhaps only rarely discuss method. During the 2019 Annual Meeting, the majority of the CMBS committee attended a special session dedicated to comparative method and found that only one of the four papers actually dealt with method. One other paper mentioned method briefly, then moved on to a case study that failed to connect with the methodological considerations with which they began; the other two papers did not deal with method at all. This experience highlights the fact that, even when scholars want to talk about comparison, very few know where to begin.

In addition to its unique standing among the current list of SBL Annual Meeting sessions, CMBS is also distinct from the Comparative Method session of the AAR Annual Meeting because it focuses on comparison within biblical studies, a field with its own specific methodological history and working assumptions about the relationships between the historical and scriptural

communities we study. This narrow focus on biblical studies ensures that participants and attendees have a shared vocabulary and, to a certain extent, intellectual common ground. This allows for deeper, more fruitful discussions pertaining to biblical studies than what is possible in the AAR Comparative Method sessions, which include specialists from all areas of religious studies (e.g., Hinduism, Daoism, Indigenous Religions).

**3. Assessment of Impact: (500-1,000 words) For new units, specify the projected impact or goals of the unit.**

**Projected Impact:**

In line with the rationale above, the CMBS session is projected to impact the field of biblical studies by challenging both how we engage our objects of study, and how we conceive of our role as comparativists. Specifically, CMBS works to:

1. Assemble sessions that further the discussion of core issues related to comparison and comparative method.
2. Prompt conversations that result in new insights into the comparative enterprise.
3. Equip scholars for the changes occurring in academia by sharing tools that assist scholars in comparing the Bible to other literatures and scriptures.
4. Draw attention to the fact that what we study through texts and artifacts are not the texts and artifacts themselves, but the communities and individuals that produced them.
5. Demonstrate that comparison is a viable means of producing insight into the meaning-making processes of diverse communities across space and time.
6. Bring awareness to the role of the comparativist as an active mediator between two or more parties rather than a passive observer of phenomena.
7. Emphasize the ethical duty to represent others, especially deceased others, with utmost consideration, self-reflection, and respect.
8. Critically examine the outcomes of the pre-critical comparisons on which modern biblical studies is based, especially those deriving from and/or resulting in claims of superiority or supersessionism.
9. Bring biblical studies into a more thoughtful, intentional, and sound relationship with other fields that study the ancient world, including Assyriology, Egyptology, and Classics.
10. Bring biblical studies into a more thoughtful, intentional, and sound relationship with fields that study other scriptures, as well as the adherents of those scriptures.
11. Attend to critiques of comparison in a way that brings biblical studies into fruitful conversation with other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, such as comparative literature, religious studies, and anthropology.

**Goals Toward Achieving Impact:**

In order to achieve the desired impact, the proposed CMBS session aims to:

1. Open and further the discussion of comparative method in the field of biblical studies.
2. Address critiques of the comparative enterprise that have been put forth by scholars in biblical studies, religious studies, and other related fields.
3. Promote scholarship that:
  - a. investigates, presents, or wrestles with questions of method.

- b. offers practical solutions to the difficulties associated with comparison.
  - c. looks to other disciplines for insight into comparison and comparative method.
  - d. considers the ethics that inform and/or stem from different modes of comparison.
  - e. uses an effective case study to illustrate a particular method, ethic, or principle of comparison.
4. Encourage attendees to develop the tools to:
- a. think critically about the act and process of comparison.
  - b. perform comparative work using tried and tested methods that address the major critiques of comparison.
  - c. tailor comparative method to their own comparative projects and teaching responsibilities.

**4. Plan for Year-1: This information does not have to be final and can change; however, please include as much detail as possible about the focus and theme of sessions or the status of session planning at this time.**

In the first year, CMBS proposes to host two sessions: one dedicated solely to papers on method presented by members of the steering committee, and another dedicated to case-studies that expressly engage method presented by invited scholars. Our invite-list will be curated with the goal of illustrating the purpose and practical nature of the new session. Papers will introduce attendees to the major issues and ethical questions posed by the act of comparison, as well as our discipline's own history on this specific topic. We will also discuss promising directions for future study, thus leaving attendees with practical suggestions of where to learn more and piquing their interest in subsequent sessions.

For the method session, we would have papers on the following themes:

- Why This Section? The Status of the Question
- The History of Comparison in Biblical Studies
- Comparing Bible to Bible
- Comparing the Bible to Other Literature
- Comparing the Bible to Other Scriptures
- Promising Directions for Future Work

For the case studies session(s), our brainstorming has generated topics and questions like:

- Judges followed by Ruth or Judges followed by the Books of Samuel: how does the order impact the reception and interpretation of the book of Judges?
- Abraham's relationship with Isaac and Ishmael: what are the rules of engagement when assessing the impact of the interpretation viewed through the NT and/or Quran?
- To Compare or Not to Compare? Shakespeare and the Bible in the World Literature Classroom
- A Critical Evaluation of the Use of Comparison in Scholarly Models Explaining the Origin of John's Baptism
- Metaphors as Comparison

## **5. Plan for Year 2:**

CMBS will participate in the Call for Papers, with at least one session dedicated to a theme of the committee's choosing. The dedicated session will present a case-study on comparing scriptures. We will invite 3-4 scholars from various backgrounds to interpret Genesis 12 from the perspective of the scriptural traditions they study (e.g., Judaic, Christian, Islamic), then a respondent will compare those interpretations using some of the critical attention and tools shared in other sessions. We will allow ample time for discussion, both among the panelists and with the audience.