



Reflections on a Trip to Fiji Arranged through SBL's International Cooperation Initiative

"I found your name on the SBL's International Cooperation Initiative list and wanted to know if you would be interested in coming to Fiji for a month to teach Hebrew Bible at Pacific Theological College." Early in May, I received a late-night e-mail message to this effect from Dr. Holger Szesnat, Senior Lecturer in New Testament at Pacific Theological College. Less than four months later I flew to the South Pacific to spend a month of my sabbatical teaching a ten-week course on the Kethuvim in four weeks. You may be asking why I would do this when I only have one semester of sabbatical leave. All summer long, I asked myself the same question. But now that I did it, my question has become why wouldn't I have done it.

Pacific Theological College is located in Suva, the capital of Fiji, on Viti Levu, one of Fiji's two main islands. Suva is on the rainy side of the island, miles away from the beautiful beaches listed in the travel guides. PTC has about 10 faculty members—some European, some former students from the islands who went on to get their doctorates. There are about fifty students coming from across the South Pacific enrolled in Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral studies. Most of the faculty and students live on campus so life at PTC has a strong community feeling.

I had been warned that the students might not talk much in class. Sadly this is not much of a change from some of my classes at home, although for different reasons. At PTC all classes are conducted in English but some students are still less comfortable speaking and writing in English than in their native languages. In addition, their previous educational experiences were primarily lecture-based so it is hard to break out of that mold. However, I found that when I gave them short writing activities with specific instructions, they did them diligently and actually did start to speak up. Even if they did not want to ask questions in class, they often asked questions during the class breaks, which we then discussed in class. For instance, one student asked me why some churches use the book of Proverbs as a sort of horoscope based on the date of a child's birth. I had never heard of this, but several of the students said they had heard of such a use.

When we got to the book of Proverbs, I asked them to bring examples of proverbs they had heard as children. I expected to hear many local proverbs like this one shared by a student from the Solomon Islands, “He who shouts sells his fish.” (Comparable in a sense to “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.”) Instead, most of the proverbs they shared were common proverbs from America – “Birds of a feather flock together,” “Like father, like son,” etc. Since many of the early missionaries came from England and America, it is plausible that they would have brought sayings like these. I then introduced them to Robin Galleher Branch’s play “Life’s Choices.” (Robin Gallaher Branch, " Life's Choices: A Play Based on Eight Characters in Proverbs," *SBL Forum*, n.p. [cited Feb 2006]. Online:<http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=488>). Although her play is set in Johannesburg, they could relate well to it. Their positive reaction to the play encouraged me to develop a short skit based on Matthew 20:1-16 (The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard), which my students performed.

As in my previous travels to Israel, Jordan, and India, one of my favorite parts of the trip was experiencing another culture. This began on my first day in Fiji when I purchased a “pocket-sulu,” a tailored sarong which is traditional business wear for men – and much more comfortable and practical than pants in a rainy and humid climate. I heard many beautiful songs and I was able to see traditional dances at an Anglican service commemorating the martyrdom of the first Anglican Bishop of Melanesia. On several occasions I was invited to join in the drinking of *yaqona* or *grog*, a ceremonial drink made of the ground-up roots of a pepper-like plant. Toward the end of my stay, I was the guest of honor at “light meals” hosted by my class, by the faculty, and by the college. Along with the copious food and gifts, I was even serenaded with a farewell song at the all-college gathering.

Even though many of my friends and colleagues at home made sarcastic comments about spending my sabbatical sitting under palm trees on a sandy beach, much of my time in Fiji was spent in the classroom, preparing for class, and even in a few faculty meetings. (In fact, Suva is on the rainy side of the island and the nearest suitable beach is at least an hour away by car.) I did, however, get a chance to enjoy weekend visits to the beach for snorkeling, a visit to a cultural center for a fire-walking and traditional dance performance, and a stay at a resort next to a national forest with opportunities for hiking. The other faculty members were also generous in their invitations to dinner and to join them in movie nights.

With all of this going on, my time in Fiji went very quickly and I am now home—back with my family and trying to work on my sabbatical research on religious diversity in Buffalo. I did actually manage to get a couple of short articles written and sent to my editor while I was there, and I did some reading for my project. But I gained so much more. I came home inspired to adapt some of my experiences for use with my college students. I experienced some of the rich diversity of culture in the South Pacific. I found

a new travel destination for trips with my family and students. I have new ideas for articles and research topics. Finally, I made new friends among colleagues at PTC with whom I hope to continue to work. Despite the cultural challenges, the stresses of travel, and the thirty-six hours spent in the air or waiting at airports for my next flight, I came home rejuvenated and ready for more work. Even though sabbaticals are usually associated with projects, the root of the term does include rest after all!

As you can probably tell, I am very enthusiastic about my experience in Fiji. None of this could have happened without SBL's International Cooperation Initiative. I strongly encourage my fellow members of SBL to consider registering with the ICI for short-term teaching or other opportunities. The SBL and the ICI do not make the arrangements or provide any funding for faculty travel—they just provide a networking opportunity to connect interested faculty with schools looking for instructors. I cannot promise that your experiences will be the same as mine, but if you enter into it with a spirit of openness, a bit of flexibility, and a good sense of humor, the possibilities are endless.

I would like to make a few observations and suggestions for anyone interested in this program. First, cultural exchange of this sort can be emotionally challenging so I would encourage anyone considering a program like this to make sure that they are comfortable with living and working in different environments and cultures. Second, the brevity and intensity of the course I taught required me to hit the ground running with the class soon after I arrived in Fiji with little time for orientation or even adjustment to the time zone. Seasoned teachers may be better suited for this program due to their experience in the classroom. Recent graduates may make up for this in enthusiasm and in flexibility for traveling, but they may not be ready to adjust to the classroom expectations in a different culture. Finally, if you are invited to participate in a program like this, make sure that the expectations and arrangements for stipend, housing, and transportation are as specific as possible. Where will you be staying? What kind of local transportation is needed or provided? Will you be responsible for your own shopping and cooking? I was treated very well in Fiji, but I can think of many things that could have gone wrong if these details had not been handled carefully.

So if you see me wearing my tropical print "Bula" shirt at the Annual Meeting, feel free to ask me about Pacific Theological College and the ICI. If I get out my phone to show you pictures, I promise to restrain myself and only show you a few of the thousands that I took.

Jonathan David Lawrence is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies and Theology at Canisius College in Buffalo, New York.