

RELIGION 205 — BIBLICAL LITERATURE
Spring 2007

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I. Course Description

Religion 205 is an introduction to the study of the Hebrew Bible, in translation, with an emphasis upon the historical setting of the writings that compose the Hebrew Bible.

This course will introduce you to the dialogues between biblical traditions and the cultures and communities related to them. It is impossible to provide an adequate introduction to the Hebrew Bible in one semester, but we will study major portions of the Hebrew Bible and their interactions with such issues as history, culture, religious practice, theology, ethics, and social values. We will also consider the methods involved in the study of religion in a liberal arts setting, while striving for a focus on depth of coverage, not merely breadth.

One aspect of this course will be distinctive: The lectures will not be given during the class period; they will be posted online. This will help you in several ways, most notably for your ability to learn and retain the material. Educational research has demonstrated that students remember only a small percentage of a professor's lectures. In this course you will have both written and audio records of the lecture materials, and you can go through them at your own pace and can repeat the sections that you don't understand. You are responsible for listening to/reading the lecture before class and then coming to class with comments and/or questions about the material. Class periods will be primarily devoted to reading and interpreting selected Hebrew Bible texts, as well as going over your comments and questions about the lecture materials.

This syllabus, along with other course materials, will be posted on this class's Blackboard page. The syllabus and the course itself, however, are not set in concrete. As we progress through the semester, I encourage you to give me your feedback about the course (as I will do for you!), and the class can negotiate possible adjustments to improve the course as we go along.

II. Required Texts

Understanding the Old Testament, abridged fourth edition by Bernhard W. Anderson, assisted by Katheryn Pfisterer Darr (abbreviated as *UOT*).

The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NOAB) in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Since we will be working through this particular text and its study notes very carefully (especially in our own study guides; see below), it is essential that everyone have the NOAB text.¹

III. Goals of the Course

¹ For those students unfamiliar with the Hebrew Bible: The abbreviations for the various books of the Bible can be found in NOAB, p. xxv; the pages where each book can be found are listed in NOAB, p. xxiii. Details on chapter and verse citations can be found in the second full paragraph on p. xiv (although I will use the colon to separate chapter and verse, instead of a period). In addition, as we go through the course, please feel free to ask questions about any subject with which you are unfamiliar. Other students will likely have the same question.



By the end of the course, you should be able to:

- a) Discuss the academic study of religion and the methods employed in the critical study of the Hebrew Bible;
- b) Know the major elements, themes, and content of the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible;
- c) Be familiar with the historical contexts of the major writings of the Hebrew Bible;
- d) Understand the development and history of the people of ancient Israel, as reflected in the Hebrew Bible;
- e) Be able to write an introductory exegesis (interpretation) on specific biblical passages.

IV. Course Requirements

A. Tests (40%): There will be two tests during the semester. Each test will be non-cumulative and will cover all our activities during that time period (e.g., online lectures, readings, *UOT* review questions, and study guides). Tests will contain both objective and essay questions. Make-up tests will only be given for excused absences, if you notify me *in advance*.

B. Study Guides, Reading Guides, and Hebrew Bible Readings (10%): In concert with the exegetical papers, you will work through a study/reading guide and or Hebrew Bible text in preparation for each class. Unless I indicate otherwise, you should work through these study guides by yourself (some will be done in groups). It is important that you complete these study guides before coming to class (it will greatly facilitate our class discussions); sometimes I will ask you to do the study guides on-line. When you do an on-line study guide, please make sure that you print out a copy of your answers and bring it to class.

C. UOT Questions (5%): The textbook, a standard for many years, has been updated and abridged. Because of the scope of the text, we need to focus on the most important issues and questions. To expedite this process, I will provide you with review questions for the textbook. It is important that you understand the context of each answer from the review questions. Don't just copy down the words from the text verbatim; rewrite the concepts in your own words and make sure you understand the implications of the answer. One big hint: All test questions *from the textbook* will come from the *UOT* review questions. I want your answers to the questions handwritten and kept separate from your class notes and study guides, because you must turn them in during the final exam.

D. Exegetical Papers (25%): One of the goals of the class is to enable you to read the Hebrew Bible with informed eyes and ears, so in class we will spend most of our time focused on specific biblical passages. The final exegetical paper (20%) is a 3500-4000 word (twelve to fifteen page) interpretive essay on a Hebrew Bible passage that you will pick in consultation with the professor. Every week, however, to help develop the skills for writing this exegetical paper, we will examine other texts, and you will sometimes write one-page exegetical observations on those passages before coming to class, papers that will be peer-evaluated and discussed in class (5%).

We will begin on the very first day of class to work on the skills necessary to write an exegetical paper, and the paper will develop in stages over the course of the semester. Due dates for text selection, paper draft, and final paper will be posted on the class conference.

E. Final Exam (15%): The final exam will cover the material since the last test. It will be similar in format to the others tests, but it will also have a cumulative essay.

F. Class Attendance and Participation (5%): Class attendance and participation, especially in this class, are essential to the learning process and to your grade. You are expected to attend each class session, to be on time, and to be prepared to interact with the subject matter and each other. You will be allowed two absences without academic penalty. If you have more than two absences, three points will be subtracted from your final numerical average *for each absence*. Participation in religious observances, participation in a college-sponsored activity, or absence due to a death in the family will not count as absences, if I am notified in advance.

V. Appointments

My office hours are Monday 10:00-12:00 a.m. and Tuesday 3:45-4:45 p.m. If you cannot meet with me during the posted hours, please see me after class, and we will arrange a mutually convenient time. Don't forget, I am (almost!) always available via e-mail and Learn Link. Please don't hesitate to e-mail me.

VI. Course Philosophy

This course is intended for anyone who is interested in studying the Hebrew Bible. No prior knowledge of the Bible is required or expected, nor is any particular religious stance encouraged (or discouraged), other than what is outlined below.

We will engage in the academic study of the Hebrew Bible. This approach means that we all must be open to the contemporary methods of the scholarly study of these texts and their contexts. We will focus primarily on the interpretation of these texts in the context of their ancient settings, not primarily their direct value for the life of religious communities today.

No one is completely objective; we need to recognize our own subjectivity and affirm openly our presuppositions. This recognition is the first step to intellectual growth, because you become more understanding of other persons' "subjective perspectives"—whether or not you are persuaded by them. I simply ask all of you to approach this class with an open mind. For religious believers, no matter your beliefs or religion, this openness must include a willingness to explore interpretations and understandings other than the ones with which you might be familiar (or even comfortable). For those of you who do not see yourselves as religious believers, it means that you should recognize the value of these texts as literature: literature that includes extraordinary historical, literary, social, and cultural information; literature that has had a tremendous historical, literary, social, and cultural impact upon millions of people around the world for thousands of years.

As is to be expected in a college classroom, all of us have divergent beliefs, and I expect you, like me, not to try to force your personal beliefs on others in this class. You will be encouraged to state your opinions and to dialogue with others, but everyone's views will be respected. We will explore these texts and their contexts as carefully as we can and will also strive to be intellectually, historically, and religiously honest.

An essential part of that honesty is the ability to trust each other. All of us at Oxford College live by the standards set forth in the Honor Code (pages 96-99 in the 2006-2008 Oxford College Catalog), which includes the “responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work” (p. 96). The Honor Code also indicates that we cannot tolerate actions in others that violate this code, so I (and you) am obligated to report any violations. Oxford College takes this honor code very seriously, as do I, and penalties for violations are severe. Please read the Honor Code carefully; I will trust you to conduct yourselves accordingly.

VII. Course Outline

The class will follow—but not exactly duplicate the content of or cover the entire book—the outline of *UOT*. For each chapter of *UOT*, students are to: (a) read, listen, and write down questions to the online lectures; (b) read the chapter; (c) answer the *UOT* review questions for the chapter, (d) and read the biblical readings listed for the chapter.

Understanding the Old Testament

Biblical Readings

Introduction	Ps 78; 105 Ex 15:1–8
Chapter 1: The Beginnings of Israel	
Chapter 2: Liberation from Bondage	Ex 1–15
Chapter 3: Covenant in the Wilderness	Ex 19–24; Deut 5–7, 11, 14 – 15
Chapter 4: The Promised Land	Num 20–24; Josh 1–12; 24
Chapter 5: The Formation of an All-Israelite Epic	Gen 1–50
Chapter 6: The Struggle between Faith and Culture	Judg 4–6 1 Sam 1–12
Chapter 7: The Throne of David	1 Sam 13 – 2 Sam 24 1 Kings 1–11
Chapter 8: Prophetic Troublers of Israel	1 Kings 12 – 2 Kings 8
Chapter 9: Fallen is the Virgin Israel	2 Kings 9–17 Amos; Hosea
Chapter 10: Judah's Covenant with Death	2 Kings 15:32–20:21 Isa 1–11; 28–32 Micah 1–3; 6:1–8

Chapter 11: The Rediscovery of the Mosaic Torah	2 Kings 21–23 Jer 1:1–4:4
Chapter 12: The Doom of the Nation	2 Kings 24–25 Jer 4:5–45:5
Chapter 13: By the Waters of Babylon	Ezek 1–24; 33–39
Chapter 14: The Dawn of a New Age	Isa 40–55 Jonah
Chapter 15: A Kingdom of Priests	Ezra; Neh 1–10; 13 Ps 1
Chapter 16: The Praises of Israel	Ps 8; 19:1–6; 33 Ps 95–100; 145–150
Chapter 17: The Beginning of Wisdom	Prov 1–9 Job 1–31; 38; 42
Chapter 18: The Unfinished Story	Esther; Daniel