

RELIGION 205 — BIBLICAL LITERATURE

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Dr. David B. Gowler
Pierce Professor of Religion
Humanities 203; 770-784-8413
dgowler@emory.edu

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.

Please note: This syllabus and the course itself 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.

This syllabus, along with other course materials (study guides, *UOT* review questions, Internet links), will be posted on this class's Learn Link page.

Three Pierce Program in Religion events this semester will be of interest to this class:

- September 9: Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Quran in the 21st Century." Although his topic is not directly related to this course, Dr. Nasr is one of the world's foremost Islamicists and is well worth hearing.
- November 4: Dr. Martin Marty, "Readers of Religious Texts as Healers and Killers." Dr. Marty is a renowned church historian and author. *Time* Magazine named Dr. Marty the "most influential interpreter of religion" in the United State.
- November 20: Dr. Christopher C. Rowland, "William Blake, the Bible, and Radical Politics." Dr. Rowland holds the most prestigious chair in Religion in the United Kingdom. He is The Dean Ireland's Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture, The Queen's College, Oxford University, England.

We are extremely fortunate to have Dr. Nasr, Dr. Marty, and Dr. Rowland lecture at Oxford College this semester (Mrs. Rosalynn Carter will also be at Oxford in the spring semester—February 18). I encourage you to attend their lectures; they are also Oxford Studies events.

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 (abbreviated as 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

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

- a) the academic study of religion and the methods employed in the critical study of the Hebrew Bible;
- b) the major elements, themes, and content of the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible;
- c) the historical contexts of the major writings of the Hebrew Bible;
- d) the development and history of the ancient people of Israel, as reflected in the Hebrew Bible;
- e) and how 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., 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 and Reading Guides (15%): Each week (on average) you will work through a study or reading guide that will focus in some detail upon a specific text or upon a particular issue. 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 Review Questions (5%): The textbook, a standard for many years, has recently 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; 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

¹ For those students who are unfamiliar with the Hebrew Bible, the following information may be helpful: The abbreviations for the various books of the Bible can be found in NOAB, pp. xxvii-xxviii; the pages where each book can be found are listed in NOAB, pp. xxv-xxvi. Details on chapter and verse citations can be found in the second full paragraph on p. xix (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.

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. Final Examination and Exegetical Paper (30%):

1. The final exam (15%) 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.
2. The exegetical paper (15%) is a eight to ten page interpretive essay on a Hebrew Bible passage. 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 often spend entire class periods focused on specific biblical passages. The exegetical paper will help you refine this process. It may be turned in any time during the semester, but at the latest it has to be approved by mid-term and turned in by the last day of class. I will distribute a list of several passages that would be appropriate, as well as information for how best to proceed with writing an exegetical paper. In addition, on the home page of the Oxford College Pierce Program in Religion you will find a list of Internet resources that will be of help to you (click on "Links to Online Religion Resources"): <http://www.emory.edu/OXFORD/pierceprogram/Pierce.html>.

E. Class Attendance and Participation (10%): 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, one point 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 M/W 2:00-4:00 and Friday 2:00-3:00. 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. Learn Link is often the quickest way to reach me, either at home or in the office.

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 98-101 in the Oxford College Catalog), which includes the “responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work” (p. 94). 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 the chapter; (b) answer the *UOT* review questions for the chapter, (c) 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