

RELIGION 205 (WRT): BIBLICAL LITERATURE
Fall 2010

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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 sacred texts in a liberal arts setting, while striving for a focus on depth of coverage, not merely breadth.

This writing-intensive course is taught in a *Ways of Inquiry* (INQ) approach, one in which students not only learn important concepts, principles, assumptions, and terminology of the academic study of the Hebrew Bible, but they also actively learn and practice why and how biblical scholars approach these texts the way they do. The focus is on *exegesis*: the multidisciplinary endeavor to understand biblical texts in the context of their ancient settings. An INQ biblical studies course begins with the texts, the questions and issues that result from reading them carefully from more than one approach or perspective. In other words, we will “start from scratch” and proceed step-by-step to build competencies in reading individual stories and to develop exegetical and writing skills (see the “exegetical paper” section below). Students learn how to read these texts, ask better and different questions about them, enter into a richer dialogue with these texts, and evaluate them literarily, historically, and culturally. In the process, I believe, students become better readers, writers, and thinkers.

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 the material. 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, at a time you prefer, and can repeat the sections that you wish/need to repeat. You are responsible for listening to/reading the lecture before class and then coming to class with comments and/or questions about the material. Thus, to a large extent, your grade depends upon your efforts outside of class to work through these lectures. Class periods will be primarily devoted to interpreting selected Hebrew Bible texts.



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II. Required Texts

Understanding the Old Testament, fifth edition by Bernhard W. Anderson, with Steven Bishop and Judith H. Newman (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

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

- a) Discuss the methods employed in the academic 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;
- e) Be able to write an introductory exegesis (interpretation) on a biblical passage.

IV. Course Requirements

A. Tests (40%): There will be two non-cumulative tests during the semester. Each test will cover all our activities during that time period (e.g., online lectures, readings, class discussions, *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. *Most of the material on the tests will come from the online lectures and the UOT review questions.* This part of the course, then, is primarily done on your own, although we will have time for questions in class.

B. UOT Review Questions (5%): The textbook, a standard for many years, has been updated and abridged. Because of the scope of the text, we will focus on the most important issues. To expedite this process, reinforce the online lectures, and help you prepare for the tests, I will provide you with (required) 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, because you must turn them in during the final exam.

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.

D. Exegetical Paper (40%): One of the goals of the class is to enable you to read/hear the Hebrew Bible with informed eyes/ears, so in class we will spend most of our time focused on specific biblical passages. The exegetical paper is a 5000-6000 word interpretive essay on a Hebrew Bible passage that you will pick in consultation with the professor.

We will begin on the very first day of class to work on the skills necessary to write this exegetical paper, and the paper will develop in stages over the course of the semester. Due dates for text selection, peer review, first “final” version, and final paper will be posted on Blackboard. To help you develop the skills for writing an exegetical paper, every class period will be devoted to examining Hebrew Bible texts in detail and from various perspectives. I sometimes will ask you to prepare for class by writing one-page practice exegeses on those passages before coming to class, which will give you valuable practice for the paper. We also will work on the paper in stages so that you have guidance along the way.

The overall paper grade is calculated this way: Before turning in the first “final” version of your paper, you also will break into pairs for peer reviews of each other’s papers (5%). After the peer critique of your paper, you will revise the paper accordingly and turn in the first “final” version of the paper (20%). After the professor critiques the paper, you will turn in the final, revised version of the paper at the end of the semester (15%).

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: Class attendance and participation 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 are allowed two absences without academic penalty. If you have more than two absences, three points will be subtracted from your final average *for each absence*. Participation in religious observances, 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. If you cannot meet with me during the posted hours, please see me after class, and we will arrange a mutually convenient time (Mon-Thurs). Don’t forget, I am (almost!) always available via e-mail. 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). Instead, we will engage in the academic study of the Hebrew Bible. This approach means that we all must be open to the 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 on their value for religious communities today.

No one is completely objective; we need to recognize our own subjectivity and openly affirm our presuppositions. This recognition is the first step to intellectual growth, because you become more understanding of other persons’ 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 includes a willingness to explore interpretations and understandings other than the ones with which you might be familiar or 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 that has made a tremendous historical, literary, social, and cultural impact upon millions of people for thousands of years.

All of us have divergent beliefs, and I expect you, like me, to respect the beliefs of others. 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 element of our semester together is the ability to trust each other. All of us at Oxford College live by the standards set forth in the Honor Code, which includes the “responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work.” 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. The Honor Code may be found at:
http://oxford.emory.edu/audiences/current_students/Academic/academic-success/student-honor-code/

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, take notes, 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. If past practice is any indication—and it is—we will not come close to finishing the *UOT* text.

Understanding the Old Testament

Introduction

Chapter 1: The Beginnings of Israel

Chapter 2: Liberation from Bondage

Chapter 3: Covenant in the Wilderness

Chapter 4: The Promised Land

Chapter 5: The Formation of an All-Israelite Epic

Chapter 6: The Struggle between Faith and Culture

Biblical Readings

Ps 78; 105

Ex 15:1–8

Ex 1–15

Ex 19–24;
Deut 5–7, 11, 14 – 15

Num 20–24;
Josh 1–12; 24

Gen 1–50

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