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Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament

TR 12:30-1:50

Dr. John C. Reeves

204B Macy

Office hours: MW 1:00-2:00; or by appointment

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Course Description

Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*), or 'Old Testament,' played a formative role in the development of the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This course provides an overview of the diverse genres of literature contained within the Hebrew Bible as well as an introduction to its modern critical study.

Representative passages drawn from the mythological, imaginative, prophetic, and cultic strata of the Bible are examined in some detail, with emphasis laid upon acquiring a nuanced understanding of the significance of these passages within their historical and literary contexts.

The course falls into two parts. First we will study a variety of short selections culled from a variety of biblical and extrabiblical sources in order to foster and develop interpretative skills, as well as gain sensitivity to the complex issues involved in the discipline of biblical studies. Once a sufficient number of such skills have been learned, I will then introduce you to an ongoing research project entitled *Reconstructing the Primeval Legends in Genesis 1-9*. Therein the class will actually 'do' biblical studies as it is practiced at the beginning of the twenty-first century and will engage in original research under the guidance of the instructor.

Texts

There is one fundamental text required for this course—that of the Hebrew Bible itself in a non-sectarian, linguistically responsible English translation. Such a text is very hard to find. While many students may already own Bibles or at least have ready access to public copies in the library, very few undergraduates realize that some popular translations are outdated and/or are of substandard quality. Moreover, many of the popular or liturgical editions possess little (if any) annotation and cross-referencing, whereas the so-called scholarly editions vary widely (from book to book) in the competence of their translation and annotation. Therefore, in order to complete the assignments for this course, the following text is **required**:

Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text (Philadelphia & Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

The following collection of ancient texts is also **required** for this course:

Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Occasionally, supplementary readings will be assigned or distributed by the instructor as needed.

Course Requirements

a. *Take-home written exercises.* An indeterminate number of written exercises (around one per week) will be prepared and submitted for in-class discussion and out-of-class evaluation. These exercises vary in length from a minimum of one (1) to a maximum of five (5) typewritten or electronically printed pages. All of these exercises will be announced by the instructor during the course of or at the conclusion of a class meeting. The instructor's evaluation of the student's collective written exercise performance will comprise 60% of the course grade.

b. *Pop-quizzes.* An indeterminate number of unannounced brief pop-quizzes may transpire during the course of the semester, usually at the beginning or near the end of the class period. These generally focus upon assigned readings and/or class discussions, and are offered solely at the discretion of the instructor. The student's cumulative pop-quiz performance will comprise 15% of the course grade. Should no quizzes be deemed necessary, this component of the course grade will be folded into that of the preceding section.

c. *Final Examination.* One (1) written take-home final examination, consisting of one or more essays, comprising 15% of the course grade. The exam will be distributed in class at the final class meeting and will be due approximately one week from that date (exact details will appear on the question sheet). This exam is subjective in format, comprehensive in content, and will draw equally upon assigned readings and class discussion for its content.

d. *Individual involvement.* Almost perfect attendance (see below) is an essential requirement for this course. Each class meeting builds upon the knowledge gained during previous meetings. Moreover, in-class discussion and analysis comprises a significant portion of every class meeting. Preparation for every class usually involves the completion of a series of assigned readings and/or written assignment(s). Students are expected to contribute in an informed manner to the public analysis and discussion of any assigned topic. The instructor's assessment of one's attendance, class preparation, and informed oral contributions will constitute

10% of the final course grade.

e. *Zakhor* (Remember!): Mastery of the assigned readings and diligent class attendance are necessary prerequisites for the successful completion of this course. Each student is responsible for all lectures, class discussions, assignments, and announcements, whether or not he/she is present when they occur.

Miscellaneous Information

a. The grading scale used in this course is as follows:

91-100 A = demonstrable mastery of material; can creatively synthesize

81-90 B = some demonstrable proficiency in control of material & analysis

71-80 C = satisfactory performance of assignments; little or no analysis

61-70 D = inadequate and/or faulty understanding of material

0-60 F = unacceptable work

b. One of the requirements of this course is to complete the work of the course on time. Sometimes there are legitimate reasons for late work—an illness or other emergency. ‘Emergency,’ however, does not include your social involvements, travel plans, job schedule, disk and/or printer failures, the state of your love life, your obligations to other courses, or general malaise over the state of the world. The world has been in a mess as long as anyone can remember, and most of the world’s work is done by people whose lives are a mass of futility and discontent. If you haven’t learned yet, you had better learn now to work under the conditions of the world as it is. **Therefore:**

1) All missed quizzes, unwritten papers, and unsubmitted exercises will be averaged as a 0 in the computation of the course grade. There is no such thing as a ‘make-up pop quiz.’ No exceptions will be considered or granted.

2) All papers and written exercises are due on the dates scheduled in the syllabus, or on the date announced by the instructor in class (usually, the next class meeting). ‘Late’ submissions bear the following penalties: one day late/one letter grade; two days late/two letter grades; three or more days late/F. Please note: these ‘days’ are calendar days, not class meeting days. For accounting purposes, letter grades bear the following values: A=95; B=85; C=75; D=65; F=30. An untyped paper or written exercise automatically receives the grade F, as do those typed papers which violate the required parameters or which the instructor deems physically unacceptable and/or grammatically incomprehensible.

3) Attendance at class meetings will be monitored by the instructor. One or two absences are somewhat understandable, three (3) is the limit of tolerability. Each successive absence lowers the Individual Involvement component of your assessment by one letter grade; seven (7) or more earns an automatic F in that component. Please note that the instructor does not distinguish ‘excused’ from ‘unexcused’ absences. Unsanctioned late arrivals and early departures will be tallied as absences.

c. Assistance and solicitation of criticism is your right as a member of the class. It is not a privilege to be granted or withheld. Do not hesitate to request it nor wait too late in the course for it to be of help.

Rough Course Outline

1. Introduction: Learning how to read the Bible

a. the book and the books

i. the world's fastest presentation of how to conceptualize Israelite literary history

ii. 'canonizing' the Hebrew Bible: historical, literary, and cultural issues

b. some exercises in historical and literary criticism

i. textual criticism: corruption and 'glosses'

ii. source criticism

iii. form criticism

iv. redaction criticism

c. some exercises in interpretation

i. categories in medieval (as opposed to modern and postmodern) biblical exegesis

ii. some targumic renderings

2. More exercises in biblical interpretation and narrative strategies

a. The world's fastest presentation of how to conceptualize biblical 'history'

b. Why Bible is not history (I): 1 Kgs 18-19//2 Chr 32//Sennacherib's Annals

c. Why Bible is not history (II): 2 Kgs 3//Moabite stone

d. Case study I: representing Moab, Ammon, Esau, *et al.*

e. Case study II: representing Abraham

f. Case study III: representing Jacob

g. Case study IV: representing 'Judah'

h. Case study V: representing Jeroboam I

3. 'History' as story: the paradigm events of redacted Israelite tradition

a. The Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12-13, 15-22; cf. Isa 51:2; Ezek 33:24; Mic 7:20)

b. Egyptian exodus and the Mosaic covenant (Exod 1-24; Josh 3 & 5; Hos 2:14-20; Mic 7:14-20; Isa 11:11-12:6, 43:18-21)

c. The Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:1-17; Ps 89:19-37; Jer 33:17; Ps 132:11-12; 1 Kgs 2:4, 8:22-26; 1 Chr 28:7)

d. Babylonian exile and the restoration (2 Kgs 25; Deut 4:1-9, 25-27; 2 Chr 36:11-21; Gen 2:4b-3:24)

4. Legends of the Fall: Reconstructing the Primeval Legends of Genesis 1-9

a. The 'genesis' of the project

b. Introduction to the source materials (Jewish, Christian, 'gnostic,' Muslim) and various *caveats*

c. Issues in cosmogony

d. Issues surrounding the story of the protoplasts (Adam & Eve)

e. Issues surrounding the story of Cain and Abel

f. Issues surrounding the antediluvian generations

g. Issues surrounding the story of Noah

Supplemental Bibliography for RELS 2104

In response to student requests for recommendations regarding useful and enlightening discussions of certain topics, themes, and personalities that are presented in class and/or readings, I offer the following suggestions for further study at the student's leisure. I confine myself to materials which I myself have used with profit and which are currently available at Atkins Library.

It is often helpful for the student to begin with appropriate articles in the standard Bible dictionaries. The latest and best is *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (6 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1992). Also reliable are *The Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible* (4 vols.) and its *Supplementary Volume* (ed. George A. Buttrick; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962 & 1976), and the *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (ed. Paul J. Achtemeier; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985). Highly recommended are the relevant articles in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (16 vols., Jerusalem: Keter, 1971).

Introductions to the Hebrew Bible and Apocrypha

R. J. Coggins, *Introducing the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (repr., New York: Meridian, 1957). Originally published in 1897 and still worthy of close study.

Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965). Still the standard work in the field.

A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978).

Daniel J. Harrington, *Invitation to the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999).

Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Samuel Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures: An Introduction to their Literature and Religious Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

Histories of Ancient Israel and Early Judaism

John Bright, *A History of Israel* (3rd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981). A standard treatment, currently being revised for a 4th edition.

Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987).

Roland de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel: To the Period of the Judges* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller, *Israelite and Judaeon History* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977).

Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel (ed. Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and E. S. Frerichs; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960). Another standard providing a different perspective from that of Bright.

Harry M. Orlinsky, *Ancient Israel* (2nd ed.; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960).

Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Bible* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971). An extraordinarily important study highlighting the religious diversity of ancient Israelite religion.

J. Alberto Soggin, *A History of Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).

Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (repr., New York: Meridian, 1957). Its original publication in 1878 inaugurated the modern critical study of the Bible.

Religion of Ancient Israel

Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion* (2 vols.; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994).

William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (2nd ed.; Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1957). An eccentric yet classic and highly readable study.

Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (2 vols.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961). Especially volume 2, which focuses upon religious life.

Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). An abridgement and translation of a classic study by an influential Israeli scholar.

Susan Niditch, *Ancient Israelite Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Johannes Pedersen, *Israel, Its Life and Culture* (4 vols. in 2; 2nd ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

Helmer Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966).

Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: YHWH and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

J. E. Wright, "Israelite Traditions," in *The Early History of Heaven* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 52-97.

Literary Studies

Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

_____, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

M. Z. Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995).

H. C. Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

David Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant: Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism (ed. J. H. Tigay; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). Probably the best book ever written about the Bible and its interpretation.

S. E. Gillingham, *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

D. M. Gunn and D. N. Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

James L. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Susan Niditch, *Oral Word and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

Alexander Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories: The Narratives about the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible, their Literary Types and History* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988).

Joel Rosenberg, *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

S. David Sperling, *The Original Torah: The Political Intent of the Bible's Writers* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). Extremely rewarding, but also difficult.

Shemaryahu Talmon, *Literary Studies in the Hebrew Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1993).

Miscellaneous

Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969). A revision of James G. Frazer's classic *Folklore in the Old Testament* (1919).

James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). The standard English collection of Egyptian, Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite, and Canaanite texts that enlighten the background and environment of Hebrew biblical texts.

Leila Avrin, "The Hebrew Book," in her *Scribes, Scripts and Books: The Book Arts from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1991), 101-37.