RELS 2104: Syllabus

RELS 2104
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.
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have ready access to public copies in the library, very few undergraduates realize that some popular translations are outdated and/or are of substandard quality.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:


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


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. \textit{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.

\section*{Miscellaneous Information}

\begin{enumerate}
  \item The grading scale used in this course is as follows:

  \begin{itemize}
    \item 91-100 \text{ A = demonstrable mastery of material; can creatively synthesize}
    \item 81-90 \text{ B = some demonstrable proficiency in control of material & analysis}
    \item 71-80 \text{ C = satisfactory performance of assignments; little or no analysis}
    \item 61-70 \text{ D = inadequate and/or faulty understanding of material}
    \item 0-60 \text{ F = unacceptable work}
  \end{itemize}

\item 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. \textbf{Therefore:}

  \begin{enumerate}
    \item 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.
    \item 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: \text{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.
    \item 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.
  \end{enumerate}

\item 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.
\end{enumerate}
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
   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)
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 proplasts (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.


**Introductions to the Hebrew Bible and Apocrypha**


**Histories of Ancient Israel and Early Judaism**


**Religion of Ancient Israel**


**Literary Studies**


