Fall 2016

**PRIESTS, PROPHETS&** Warriors:

Introducing the Hebrew Bible

**RE 201 (AB)**  **Prof. G.** **Spinner**

classroom: Ladd 106 [gspinner@skidmore.edu](mailto:spinn1g@cmich.edu)

meets: Wed & Fri, office: Ladd 205 A

12:20-1:40 pm office phone: 580-8406

office hrs: Thurs. 2:00-3:30 pm,

*or by appointment.*

***Course Description***

The Bible is one of those world-famous “books” to which many people refer or defer, and yet few have actually read it, and even fewer have read it *critically*.  We will read selectively in the Hebrew canon, thinking critically about its form and its contents. The Bible did not begin as a unified book, but rather as a library of sacred writings, working with a variety of ideas and agendas. The texts therein are not yet Jewish or Christian, but rather are documents from Israelite religion, and so we examine them in the context of the ancient Near East. Indeed, these are the texts that invent and refine the notion of “Israel” as a covenanted people and a holy land. Along the way, we will meet priests, prophets, warriors, and teachers of wisdom; and we will consider how biblical stories and teachings speak of a different way of life, even as these sacred texts still speak to us today.

***Learning Goals***

By taking this course, students will be able to:

i.) analyze major concepts in ancient Israelite thought and practice;

ii.) recognize genres and motifs in the foundational canon of two global religions,

thereby increasing cultural literacy;

iii.) disaggregate the canon, recognizing that different parts of the Hebrew Scriptures

take different positions;

iv.) understand the Documentary Hypothesis, as well as other forms of textual criticism

that may be applied to Scripture;

*and* v.) situate biblical texts in their historical contexts, not simply out of antiquarian interest,

but to better distinguish what a text actually says from what later interpreters insist it must say.

***Required Texts***

The HarperCollins Study Bible, ed. Meeks et. al.

*This is the best edition for reading critically, as the annotation is scholarly. While you may consult other translations, I would like us all to be reading the NRSV.*

John J. Collins, Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, second edition.

Michael Coogan, The Ten Commandments: A Short History of An Ancient Text.

All other required readings will be made available as a Course Reader,

distributed by the instructor.

***Holy Texts with Human Authors***

Scripture, by definition, cannot be ordinary speech: such words are held sacred because they are considered to be God’s Word. Whether claiming to be directly revealed or divinely inspired, this speech does not just to talk about Him, but is presented as *coming from God*. Yet divine inspiration is not accessible to historians, who can neither prove or disprove claims to revealed truth. Such an elevated ontological status -- this is God’s speech, this is divinely written -- can be acknowledged, but it cannot form the empirical basis for historical inquiry. What the historical method does instead is to locate a text in a time and a place, situating it chronologically and geographically, plus identifying the *cultural location* of those responsible for committing the sacred words to writing. Thus we consider the human “authors” (who may be anonymous, attributed, or writing under an assumed name) of holy texts, even if those very “authors” would credit their authorship to God.

In this course to balance two approaches to Scripture: the historical-critical method, and the more phenomenological perspective valued in Religious Studies, through which one enters into the worldview of ancient Israel and takes seriously the religious experiences being described or encouraged in the scriptural canon. Yet we do not study that canon as hermetically sealed, shut off from its milieu. Instead, we note texts older than those of the Hebrew Bible that provide models for scriptural language and imagery. By attending to the ways in which Hebrew texts re-purposed preexisting materials, we may better understand how ancient people perceived those truths. We also attend to the clear evidence that as people wrote down God’s words, they arranged and edited these texts. Indeed, many books of the Bible are actually composite works, combining sources from different times and places into texts that *at some later date* become collected into a canon.

This means that while we read *in* the Hebrew canon, we will not be reading these texts *as* a canon, in the sense that we do not presume a single, unified, consistent statement of divine purpose throughout this ancient library. This is not to say we are indifferent to the sanctity of these texts; it is just that we are interested in understanding their religious positions *prior to* their collection and sanction as a canon. In this way, the texts we shall read disclose values and practices that are *not yet* ***Jewish*** *or* ***Christian***. Rather, these texts are **Israelite**, exemplifying even more ancient forms of worship, spirituality, and social relations that would eventually develop, albeit in different ways, into what we know as Judaism and Christianity.

The strong sense of historical perspective that informs our study is never meant to lessen the Bible’s import in contemporary life. For millions of people today, the Bible is foremost a testament of faith, and its message is not confined to some earlier period or remote place.It is not our intention to diminish the Bible’s status as scripture. We do hope, however, to become more aware of the *cultural distance* stretching between ancient Israel and contemporary America, so that we can more critically engage the biblical texts, reflecting carefully on the ways that distance may be bridged.

Finally, our commitment to critical inquiry is not simply imported from modern scholarship, as an incisive spirit can be found within Scripture itself, wherein readers are exhorted to seek truth, to foster wisdom, and to pursue justice. It is hoped that biblical literacy imparts or deepens an appreciation for some of the Hebrew canon’s most enduring values, particularly the struggle to uphold what is right/eous rather than to simply acquiesce to the powerful and privileged. It is precisely because purportedly biblical values remain both relevant and contested that a fully informed and more nuanced approach to Scripture is desirable.

#### Course Requirements

Your grade consists of the following components:

**Participation 10 %**

**Short Papers 20 %**

**Research Project 20 %**

**Midterm 25 %**

**Final 25 %**

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**Total 100 %**

A few words are in order, at the outset, about some of these components:

**Attendance is mandatory**: you should make every effort to always attend class (and to be on time, and not leave prematurely). If you are too sick to come, or if an emergency arises, then please contact me as soon as possible.

Of course, **participation** is far more than showing up. It is an active engagement: you must have done the reading and be prepared to discuss it. It is talking with and listening to others: you will be an integral part of that conversation. You should have questions; you should have comments; above all, you should have curiosity. So understand that participation is not a default setting, as it requires a conscientious effort throughout the semester. Our goal is have a sustained and thoughtful conversation about this topic, and this will not be achieved through half-hearted attempts.

There will be several **Short Papers** (3-5 paragraphs, at least 2 pages) in which you compare and contrast biblical texts with non-biblical literature, honing your analytical skills. I will probably assign some other short, written exercises as well, but those will not be graded.

Both the **Midterm** and **Final** are take-home essays of moderate length. I will say more about effective essay writing and developing your ideas once the semester is under way.

Each student will undertake a mid-sized **research project** tailored to her own interests. This project will help you to cultivate some basic research skills, and allow you to explore some aspect of social life or material culture (warfare, hunting, commerce, agriculture, architecture, scribal practices, marriage, divorce, prostitution, etc.) in ancient Israel. I will say more about the parameters of this project in a separate hand-out.

If you think you have a reasonable need for an extension, then it behooves you to make the case for one *before* the assignment is due. Otherwise, late work will be marked down. I will deduct half a letter grade for each day an assignment is late. All papers and exams must be submitted in hard-copy form, unless prior arrangements are made with the instructor.

***Fair Grading & A Reasonable Workload***

As the above section makes quite clear, I expect you to work. I think the workload is entirely appropriate for this level of course; and I trust that we can have some fun working through it together. But, in the interest of fairness, allow me to be more explicit about what my expectations are, and the standards to which I will hold you.

For each hour spent in class, I expect you to spend 3 hours outside of class reading and writing. This means that you should commit approximately 9 hours per week in preparing and executing assignments. Be assured that **you need to do all of the assigned readings**, reading both the primary and secondary sources. There is no way to understand the subject and to fully participate in class if you skip, or skimp, on this most fundamental of labors.

In an era of grade inflation, let me address my understanding of what letter grades signify. I take “C” to be the baseline grade: it is *acceptable*. Thus doing all the assigned work, and doing it adequately, earns one a solid “C.” “B” then stands for doing *better than acceptable*, demonstrating some measurable improvement over “C” quality. And “A” translates to *excellent - -* a superlative I do not dispense lightly. I am not interested in employing mathematical models, such as by grading on a curve; I will happily give as many “A”s as I have students earning them. But do understand that such a high grade must be achieved through diligent effort, and can not merely be assumed.

I do not just attach a grade to your written work, but provide you with feedback on your writing. I make this effort in order to help you improve your writing skills, and so it behooves you to attend to that critique, and learn from your mistakes. While not my primary concern, errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar detract from your writing, and thus impact your grade. The overarching goal, however, is more focused on content, so that you learn to express your ideas clearly and to build convincing arguments through a careful use of evidence. This pedagogical concern is shared across disciplines, and this course contributes to that ongoing effort.

With this goal in mind, you will have the option to rewrite certain papers. If you receive a B- or lower on a major paper, then you may exercise that option. (This option only applies for major papers, such as midterms; it is not available for shorter, reflection papers, and, due to time constraints, for finals). If I hand you back a paper with a lower grade, then you can chose to meet with me. We will discuss the shortcomings of the paper, and set a new deadline for the rewritten version. You will turn in the older version along with the newer, and receive the average of the two grades.

***Classroom Civility***

Do not be late to class, do not leave the room during that time, and do not be rude while here. I hope that we will engage each other in open and honest ways, yet both our speech and our demeanor should reflect common courtesy for those around us. Inappropriate or disruptive behavior will result in being asked to leave the class.

If you need to stand up and stretch, please do so. Feel free to bring a beverage or snack, and, if you are so inclined, enough to share. I just ask that eating and drinking do not interfere with our learning.

Please turn off your devices before you come to class. Take off headphones, remove ear buds, and stow anything unconnected to our class well out of sight. I will start out the semester by allowing the use of laptops, as some students prefer to take their notes this way; but I will promptly rescind this permission if I feel that people are paying more attention to their computer screens than to class. In short, anything that might provide a distraction to the user, to other students, or to the instructor will not be indulged.

***Student Disabilities***

I am happy to make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you believe you will need it, then you must formally request academic accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities, and provide documentation verifying your disability. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.

***Honor Code***

I expect you to live up to Skidmore’s Honor Code and strictly avoid any forms of academic dishonesty. Copying from others, submitting someone else’s work as your own, or submitting your same work for two different courses are all forms of cheating. Any fact, word or thought that originated with somebody else must be promptly and properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such. Suspected infractions of the Honor Code will be duly reported to the Dean of Academic Advising.

***Partners in Learning***

To my mind, this syllabus establishes a kind of social contract, in which you and I agree to create a stimulating and supportive learning environment. We will debate positions and challenge each other. Yet whether engaging the instructor or other students, I simply ask that you be civil, even as I will push you to be honest and open in your thinking.

I trust that with this syllabus I have made clear my expectations, and that if I have not, you will call me to account. I also ask that you make your expectations clear to me, and let me know how we can best achieve that partnership in learning. You may always ask questions; I will not mind if you ask me to repeat something or to clarify a point. Feel free to come by my office, or to contact me by e-mail, in order to discuss any matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

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**CLASS SCHEDULE**

**RE 201 / Fall 2016**

##### *Please Note:* you should have the assigned readings done before you come

to the class for which they have been assigned.

Sept 7. Introductions.

Sept 9. **Canons & Contexts**. The Ancient Near East. Reading 1.

Sept 14. Genesis. **Noah.** Reading 2.

Sept 16. Genesis**. Noah,** *continued.* Reading 3.

Sept 21. Genesis**. Abraham**. Reading 4.

Sept 23. Genesis. **Abraham**, *continued*. Reading 5.

Sept 28. Genesis. **Jacob**. Reading 6.

Sept 30. Exodus. **Songs at the Sea**. Reading 7.

Oct 5. Exodus. **Theophany & Torah**. Reading 8.

Oct 7. Exodus. **A Golden Calf & Broken Tablets**. Reading 9.

Oct 12. *No class*: Yom Kippur

Oct 14. Exodus & Leviticus.“**A Nation of Priests…”**.Reading 10

Oct 19. Leviticus. **“….and a Holy People.”** Reading 11.

Oct 21. Numbers. **Wandering, Murmuring, Killing**. Reading 12.

Oct 26. Deuteronomy. **Blessing & Curse**, **Life & Death.**  Reading 13.

Oct 28. *American Interlude:* **Ancient Laws & Modern Times**. Reading 14.

Nov 2. Wisdom, Exhorted:  **Proverbs***.*  Reading 15.

Nov 4. Wisdom, Questioned: **Ecclesiastes**. Reading 16.

Nov 9. Warriors. **Joshua,** **Deborah & Jael.** Reading 17.

Nov 11. Warriors. **Samson.** Reading 18.

Nov 16. Prophets. **Amos**. Reading 19.

Nov 18. Prophets. **Hosea.** Reading 20.

*Thanksgiving Break*

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**CLASS SCHEDULE,** *continued*

Nov 30. Prophets. **Ezekiel.** Reading 21.

Dec 2. Prophets. **Isaiah**. Reading 22.

Dec 7. Prophets. **Zechariah.**  Reading 23.

Dec 9. **From Traditions to Scripture**. Reading 24.

Dec 14. Conclusions.

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Readings

**CR** stands for Course Reader

Reading 1. Collins, Introduction: pp.1-top of 16, p. 27-first column of p. 32,

and Conclusion section, pp. 46-47.

Reading 2. Genesis chs. 6-9. Collins: pp. 16-18, and 49- first column of p.64.

Reading 3. *Review* the Noah story. Collins: section on Atrahasis, pp. 33-34,

and section on The Flood, pp. 81-82. CR-1.

Reading 4. Genesis 12:1-18:15. Collins: pp. 85-mid 96. CR-2.

Reading 5. Genesis chs. 21-23. *Skim* Judges 11:29-40. Collins: pp. 96-mid 100.

Reading 6. Genesis 25:19-34, 27:1-29:32, and 32:1-35:15.

Collins: pp. 100-first column of 102.

Reading 7. Exodus chs. 1-17, *focusing upon* chs.3-4, the first half of ch. 6,

and chs. 13-15. Collins: pp. 109-122. CR-3.

Reading 8. Exodus chs. 19-24, *focusing upon* chs.19-20 and 23-24. CR-4.

Collins: pp. 125- first column of 138.

Reading 9. Exodus chs. 32-34, and *skimming* chs. 35-40. Collins: pp. 138-140.

Reading 10. *Skim* Exodus chs. 25-31 and 35:4-40:33. *Read* Leviticus chs. 1-8.

Collins: pp. 143-top 150.

Reading 11. Leviticus chs. 11-19, 21, and 26. Collins: pp. 150-first column of p.157.

Levine and Milgrom (CR-5 and 6).

Reading 12. Numbers 9:15-10:10, 11:1-12;16, 13:25-14:45, 20:1-13, 21:4-9, 25:1-18,

and ch. 31. Collins: pp. second column of 157-160.

Reading 13. Deuteronomy 3:23-4:40, 5:1-7:26, 10:12-12:32, 24:14-22, 25:13-16,

28:1-68, 30:1-20, and 34:1-12. Collins: pp. 163-mid 177.

Coogan, The Ten Commandments pp. 9-24 and 135-141.

Reading 14. Coogan, chs. 1, 3, 5, and 7-8.

Reading 15. Proverbs 3:13-18, 6:6-19, 7:1-9:16, 15:1-33, 22:17-23:21, 26:1-11, 27:1-6,

and 31:10-31. Collins: pp. 507-522. CR-7.

Reading 16. Ecclesiastes chs.1, 3, 4:1-6, ch. 6, 7:15-18, 9:1-12, and ch.12.

Collins: pp. mid 537-544.

Reading 17. Joshua chs 3-4, and 10:1-15. Judges chs. 4-5.

Collins: pp. 185-186, 189-202, and 211-216.

Reading 18. Judges chs. 13-16. Collins: pp. 220-top 223.

Reading 19. Amos 3:1-5:24 and chs 7-9. Collins: pp. 299-302 and 305-314. CR-8.

Reading 20. Hosea 1:1-6:6 and ch 14. Collins: pp. 314-323.

Reading 21. Ezekiel chs. 1-6, 8-12, and 16-18. *Review* Lev 26.

Collins: pp. 371-391.

Reading 22. Isaiah 40:1-41:20, 49:1-7, 50: 4-11, 52:13-55:13.

Collins: pp. 395-405.

Reading 23. Zechariah chs. 5-6, 8:1-14, 9:9-17, and chs. 13-14.

Collins: pp. 417-first paragraph on 418, and mid 421-431.

Reading 24. Collins: pp. 611-615. Brettler (CR-9).