Fall 2014

**Hebrew Scriptures**:

An Introduction

**RE 201 (AB) / HF 200-02**  **Prof. G.** **Spinner**

classroom: Ladd 307 [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: Tues & Wed 2:00-3:00,

*or by appointment.*

***Course Description***

The Bible is one of those world-famous “books” (actually, it is a whole library) to which many people refer or defer, and yet few have actually read it, and even fewer have read it *critically*. In this introductory survey we read selectively and critically in the Hebrew canon, examining biblical texts as historical documents of Israelite religion. Indeed, these are the texts that invent and refine the notion of “Israel” as a covenanted people and a holy land. Focusing primarily on patriarchal stories, priestly instructions, and prophetic oracles, we will also read proverbs and love poetry, situating all such texts within the context of the ancient Near East, and so occasionally compare them to cognate literatures.

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 an earlier period or to a remote place.It is not our intention to diminish this status. Yet, on one hand, we become more aware of the *cultural distance* stretching between ancient Israel and contemporary America; on the other hand, we reflect on the ways that distance may be bridged.

Finally, our commitment to critical inquiry is not simply imported from modern scholarship, for an incisive spirit can be found within Scripture itself, where 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 an informed and nuanced approach to Scripture is requisite.

***Learning Goals***

By taking this course, students will be able to:

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

ii.) become acquainted with genres and motifs in the foundational canon of two ‘World 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.

***On Reserve***

John J. Collins. Does The Bible Justify Violence?

*A very brief, but incisive, discussion.*

Michael Coogan. God & Sex: What the Bible Really Says

*A nuanced and balanced discussion of some of the major issues concerning*

*gender and sexuality.*

Timothy Beal. The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book

*There are many works that trace the history and influence of the Bible; this is a*

*short introduction to the topic that asks critical questions about the continuing role*

*the Bible plays in contemporary American life.*

The above books are simply good places to start digging into some of the controversies arising from how one reads Scripture. I am happy to suggest others.

***Honors Forum Add-On***

You have the option of signing up for an additional, fourth credit hour, listed as **HF 200-02**. You do not need to be in the Honors Forum to sign up for HF 200; you must simply be interested in delving deeper into an area of Hebrew Scriptures or learning about some aspect we will not cover in class. HF 200 is flexible, in that there is no set time for us to meet. The add-on works like an independent study, allowing you to devise a project related to RE 201 and tailored to your interests. One does some additional readings and research, and then either writes a conventional academic paper (15 pages, fully cited), or one produces a creative work (such as a visual or musical piece based on your research).

#### Course Requirements

Your grade consists of the following components:

**Participation 10 %**

**Short Papers 30 %**

**Midterm 30 %**

**Final 30 %**

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**Total 100 %**

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

Attendance is mandatory: you will come to each and every class. 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.

While **participation** is contingent upon attendance, it involves much more than just showing up. Participation is not a “gimme,” as it requires a strong and continual effort throughout the semester. I will be evaluating you on your 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.

There will be several **Short Papers** in which you compare and contrast biblical texts with non-biblical literature, honing your analytical skills. 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.

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.

To sum up these requirements: clearly, I expect you to work. But I think the workload is appropriate, and I trust that we can have some fun working through it together.

***Classroom Civility***

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

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 cell phones and any other small electronic devices before you come to class. Take your headphones off or remove your ear buds, and stow anything that texts or beeps well out of sight. I will start the semester out 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 screen 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 Palamountain Hall.

***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

**Hebrew Scriptures**

**CLASS SCHEDULE**

**RE 201 / Fall 2014**

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

to the class for which they have been assigned.

Sept 3. Introductions.

Sept 5. **Canons & Contexts**. The Ancient Near East. Reading 1.

Sept 10. **Genesis.** Noah. Reading 2.

Sept 12. **Genesis.** Noah, *continued.* Reading 3.

Sept 17. **Genesis.** Abraham. Reading 4.

Sept 19. **Genesis.** Abraham, *continued*. Reading 5.

Sept 24. **Genesis.** Jacob. Reading 6.

Sept 26. *No class*: Rosh ha-Shanah.

Oct 1. **Genesis.** Jacob, *continued*. Reading 7.

Oct 3. **Exodus.** Songs at the Sea. Reading 8.

Oct 8. **Exodus.** Theophany & Torah. Reading 9.

Oct 10. **Exodus.** A Golden Calf & Broken Tablets. Reading 10.

Oct 15. **Leviticus.** “A Nation of Priests…”. Reading 11.

Oct 17. **Leviticus.** “….and a Holy People.” Reading 12.

Oct 22. **Numbers.** Wandering & Complaining. Reading 13.

Oct 24. **Deuteronomy.** Blessing & Curse. Reading 14.

Oct 29. *Interlude:* **Ancient Laws & Modern Times**. Reading 15.

Oct 31. Wisdom, Exhorted:  **Proverbs**. Reading 16.

Nov 5. Wisdom, Questioned: **Ecclesiastes**. Reading 17.

Nov 7. **Judges.** War & Women. Reading 18.

Nov 12. **Judges.** War & Women, *continued.* Reading 19.

Nov 14. **The Song of Songs**. Reading 20.

**CLASS SCHEDULE***, continued*

Nov 19. Prophets: **Elijah & Elisha**. Reading 21.

Nov 21. Prophets: **Amos & Hosea**. Reading 22.

Nov 26-28. *No classes:* **Thanksgiving Break**.

Dec 3. Prophets: **Isaiah**. Reading 23.

Dec 5. Prophets: **Zechariah**. Reading 24.

Dec 10. Conclusions. Reading 25.

*Reading Assignments for*

**Hebrew Scriptures**

**CR** stands for Course Reader

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

Reading 2. Genesis chs. 6-9. Collins: pp. 16-18, and 49-61.

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 chs. 12-17. Collins, pp. 85-mid 96.

Reading 5. Genesis 18:1-15, chs. 21-23. Collins, pp. 96-mid 100. CR-2.

Reading 6. Genesis 25:19-34, chs. 27-28. Collins, pp. 100-first column of 101.

Reading 7. Genesis chs. 29-33, and ch. 35.

Reading 8. 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 9. Exodus chs. 19-31, *focusing upon* chs.19-20 and 23-24. CR-4.

Collins, pp. 125- first column of 138.

Reading 10. Exodus chs. 32-34, and *skimming* chs. 35-40. Collins, pp. 138-140.

Reading 11. Leviticus chs. 1-8 and 16. Collins, pp. 143-top 150.

Reading 12. Leviticus chs. 11-15, and 17- 22:16. Collins, pp. 150-155.

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

and 27:12-23. Collins, pp. second column of 157-160.

Reading 14. Deuteronomy 4:1-40, 5:1-7:26, 10:12-22, 25:13-17, 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 15. Coogan, chs. 1, 3, 5, and 7-8.

Reading 16. 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-5

Reading 17. Ecclesiastes chs. 1, 3, 4:1-6, 6, 7:15-18, 9:1-12, and 12.

Collins, pp. mid 537-544.

Reading 18. Judges chs. 4-5, and 11. Collins, pp. 211-216.

Reading 19. Judges chs. 13-16. Collins, pp. mid 219-top 223.

Reading 20. The Song of Songs, in its entirety. Collins, pp. mid 500-503. CR-6.

Reading 21. 1 Kings chs. 17-19, and 2 Kings ch. 2. Collins, pp. mid 279-first paragraph,

second column of 285, and 299-302. CR-7.

Reading 22. Amos 3:1-5:24 and ch.9. Hosea 1:1-6:6 and ch 14. Collins, pp. 305-323.

Reading 23. Isaiah 1:1-2:4, 6:1-7:25, 11:1-9, 40:1-11, 49:1-6, 52:13-53:12, and 65:1-25.

Collins, pp.325-middle of first column of 332, then *skimming through* 339, and 395-first paragraph on 410, then *skimming through* 414.

Reading 24. Zechariah chs. 5-6, 8:1-14, 9:9-17, and chs 13-14. Collins, pp.417-mid 418, and mid 421-431.

Reading 25. Collins, pp. 611-615.