

PRIESTS, PROPHETS & **WARRIORS:** Introducing *the Hebrew Bible*

RE 201 (AB)

classroom: Ladd 107
meets: Tues & Thurs,
2:10-3:30 pm

Prof. G. Spinner

gspinner@skidmore.edu
office: Ladd 205 A
office phone: (518) 580-8406
office hrs: Wed 10:15-11:15 am,
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. For 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; and some of the most significant of biblical texts are themselves composite works.

The texts collected in the Hebrew Bible are not yet Jewish or Christian; rather they are documents from Israelite religion, and so we examine them within the context of the ancient Near East. Indeed, we are reading the texts that invent and refine the very notion of “Israel” as a covenanted people and a holy land. Along the way, we meet patriarchs, priests, prophets, warriors, and teachers of wisdom, surveying some of the diversity of Israelite religion. Occasionally, we will read these biblical texts alongside of non-Israelite sources, which provide models for and instructive counterpoints to biblical literature.

We consider how biblical stories and teachings speak of a rather different way of life, even as we assume that these texts might still speak to us today. While this notion may be comforting, it should also be challenging, because as Israelite texts call people to lead better lives it requires them to think carefully about what is right and just, on both individual and collective levels. There are disturbing passages in the Hebrew Bible, and we will not shy away from reading them critically. From child sacrifice to ethnic cleansing, we will see that certain articulations of the sacred authorize violence, and so we will have ample opportunity to discuss how such texts inform our understanding of religion and society. In short, the aim of this course is not entirely antiquarian, for the Bible continues to be cited and debated in contemporary life, and an informed perspective contributes significantly to these discussions.

Learning Goals

By taking this course, students will be able to:

- (i.) read closely and critically, attentive to detail and nuance;
- (ii.) recognize major concepts 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 occupy different positions;
- (iv.) understand the Documentary Hypothesis, as well as other forms of textual criticism that may be applied to Scripture;
- (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;
- (vi.) further their research skills, fostering information literacy;
- and (vii.) improve their oral communication skills.

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, third edition (Fortress Press, 2018).

Christopher Hays, Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East (WJK Press, 2014).

Michael Coogan, The Ten Commandments: A Short History of An Ancient Text (Yale University, 2014).

All other required readings will be made available as a Course Reader, distributed by the instructor.

Course Requirements

Your grade consists of the following components:

Participation	10 %
Short Papers	20 %
Midterm	30 %
<i>Research Project</i>	
Proposal	5 %
Annotated Bibliography	10 %
<i>Pecha Kucha</i> Presentation	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 measures and slack efforts.

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. The **Midterm** is a take-home essay 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 moderately 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 in ancient Israel. This research will culminate with an oral presentation, *Pecha Kucha* style, during the final exam period. 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 even a brief glance at the above sections makes 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.

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 spellings, punctuation, and grammar detract from your writing, and thus impact your grade. The overarching goal, however, is more focused on the content of your writing, 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 an essay, then you may exercise that option. If I hand you back an essay with a grade of B- or lower, then you can choose 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 expect you to stay in the classroom the whole time that class is in session. Please anticipate bodily needs, and minimize having to leave. Excuse yourself for an emergency, but not simply as a matter of convenience.

Address your instructor and classmates with respect, and respond with some measure of goodwill. Even as we try to engage each other in open and honest ways, we still want our speech and our demeanor to reflect courtesy, even kindness, for our interlocutors. Here is your Golden Rule of thumb: even when perturbed or vehemently disagreeing, consider the feelings of those present and treat others as you would want to be treated yourself.

All electronic devices must be turned off, and stowed away. Digital distraction has become a serious problem in our contemporary culture, allowing our attention to easily drift. We aim to make the classroom a space where we engage each other, and focus squarely on our subject, rather than check our messages or browse social media.

Academic Integrity

There is a zero tolerance policy for any form of intellectual dishonesty. Skidmore articulates and enforces an Honor Code, and any suspected infractions will be reported to the office of Student Academic Affairs. As the Skidmore Honor Code does not accept ignorance or error as adequate defense for violations, make sure the work you submit is entirely your own.

Copying from others, submitting the work of other people, or submitting your same work for two different courses all constitute forms of cheating. Any fact, word, or thought that originated with somebody else should be properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such.

Student Disabilities

Skidmore College is committed to making reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you believe you need accommodation, then please formally request academic accommodation from the school. Contact Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities, who can explain how to provide documentation verifying your disability. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.

Title IX

Skidmore College faculty and staff are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. We consider sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students' personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations.

If you choose to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that person is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator. That administrator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, The Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available to the student. For further information, consult [://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/](http://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/) or contact Joel Aure, Title IX Coordinator, or Sarah Green, Deputy Coordinator.

Holy Texts with Human Authors

Scripture, by definition, is never ordinary speech: it is held sacred because it is considered to be God's Word. Whether claiming to be directly revealed or divinely inspired, this speech does not just 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 inspired -- 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, and it identifies the *cultural location* of those responsible for committing the sacred words to writing. Therefore we center our study on the human "authors" (who may be anonymous, attributed, or writing under an assumed name) of holy texts, even if those very writers would credit the real authorship to God.

In this course we 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* that stretches between ancient Israel and contemporary America, so that we can more critically engage the biblical texts and reflect 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 so desirable.

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 want to cultivate a passion for learning and a commitment to critical inquiry, as well as the ability to respect those with whom we disagree. Whether engaging the instructor or other students, I 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 own expectations clear to me, letting me know how we can best achieve that partnership in learning. Please do not hesitate to contact me about matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

SCHEDULE

- Sept 5. Introductions.
- Sept 10. The Ancient Near East: **Canons & Contexts**. Reading 1.
Sept 12. Genesis. **Noah**. Reading 2.
- Sept 17. Genesis. **Noah, continued**. Reading 3.
Sept 19. **Starting on research: A visit to** Scribner Library. Reading 4.
- Sept 24. Genesis. **Abraham**. Reading 5.
Sept 26. Genesis. **Abraham, continued**. Reading 6.
- Oct 1. *No Class*: Rosh ha-Shanah.
Oct 3. Genesis. **Jacob**. Reading 7.
- Oct 8. Exodus. **Songs at the Sea**. Reading 8.
Oct 10. Exodus. **Theophany & Torah**. Reading 9.
- Oct 15. Exodus. **A Golden Calf & Broken Tablets**. Reading 10.
Oct 17. Exodus & Leviticus. **“A Nation of Priests...”**. Reading 11.
- Oct 22. Leviticus. **“...and a Holy People.”** Reading 12.
Oct 24. Warriors. **Deborah, Jael & Samson**. Reading 13.
- Oct 29. Prophets. **Amos & Hosea**. Reading 14.
Oct 31. Prophets. **Jeremiah**. Reading 15.
- Nov 5. **Prayers & Laments**. Reading 16.
Nov 7. Prophets. **Ezekiel**. Reading 17.
- Nov 12. Wisdom, Exhorted: **Proverbs**. Reading 18.
Nov 14. Wisdom, Questioned: **Ecclesiastes**. Reading 19.
- Nov 19. Numbers. **Wandering & Murmuring**. Reading 20.
Nov 21. Deuteronomy. **Entering the Land**. Reading 21.
- Nov 26. *No class*: Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.
- Thanksgiving Break.*
- Dec 3. Deuteronomy. **Making Contracts with God**. Reading 22.
Dec 5. **From Ancient Israel to Modern America**. Reading 23.
- Dec 10. Conclusions. Reading 24.
- Dec 16. *Pecha Kucha* Presentations.
6:00-9:00 pm.

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Readings

CR stands for Course Reader

- Reading 1. Collins, Introduction: pp.1-mid 15, pp. 25-mid 32, and conclusion, p. 49.
- Reading 2. Genesis chs. 6-9. Collins: pp. 15-20 and 53-68.
- Reading 3. *Review* the Noah story. Collins: sections on Atrahasis, pp. 33-34, and The Flood, pp. 82-83. Hays, Hidden Riches: pp. 75-95.
- Reading 4. *TBA*.
- Reading 5. Genesis 12:1-19:29. Collins: pp. 85-93. Ovid (CR).
- Reading 6. Genesis chs. 20-23. *Skim* Judges 11:29-40 and 2 Kings 3:21-27. Collins: pp. 94-mid 100.
- Reading 7. Genesis 25:19-34, 27:1-30:24, and 32:1-35:27. Collins: pp. 100-top 102, and bottom 105.
- Reading 8. Exodus chs. 1-17, *focusing on* chs. 2-4, the first half of ch. 6, and chs. 13-15. Hays: pp. 114-119. Collins: section on Canaanite mythology, pp. 42-46, and pp. 107-121.
- Reading 9. Exodus 19:1-23:9. Hays: pp. 121- 144. Collins: pp. 125- 137.
- Reading 10. Exodus chs. 24 and 32-34. Collins: bottom 137-mid 146.
- Reading 11. *Skim* Exodus chs. 25-31 and 35:4-40:38. *Read* Leviticus chs. 1-8, and 16. Hays: pp. 147-160. Collins: pp. mid 146-151.
- Reading 12. Leviticus chs. 11-15, 17-19, 21, and 26. Collins: pp. 152-156. Levine (CR) and Milgrom (CR).
- Reading 13. Judges chs. 4-5 and chs. 13-16. Collins: 215-top 217, mid 218-220, and 224-227.
- Reading 14. Amos 4:1-5:24 and ch 9. Hosea chs. 1, 2 and 14. Hays: pp. 265-274. Collins: pp. 307-310 and 313-331.
- Reading 15. Jeremiah 1:1-4:4, chs. 6-7, 23:1-8, and 31:31-40. Weems (CR). Collins: pp. mid 364-371.
- Reading 16. Psalms 26-28 and 51. Lamentations chs. 1-3. Hays: pp. 339-355 and 375-395. Collins: pp. 378-380 and 495-top 505.
- Reading 17. Ezekiel chs.1-6, 8-12, and 16-18. *Review* Lev 26. Hays: pp. 239-243. Collins: pp. 371-396.
- Reading 18. 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. Hays: pp. 297-319. Collins: pp.521-536.
- Reading 19. Ecclesiastes chs.1, 3, 4:1-6, ch. 6, 7:15-18, 9:1-12, and ch.12. Collins: pp. 551-558.
- Reading 20. 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. bottom 156-160.
- Reading 21. Deuteronomy 3:8-4:40, 5:1-7:26, 10:12-12:32, 24:14-22, and 25:13-16. Collins: pp. 163-mid 164 and 174-mid 177. Collins, "The 'Ban'" (CR).
- Reading 22. Deuteronomy 28:1-68, 30:1-20, 31:30-32:52, and 34:1-12. Hays: pp. 161-189. Collins: mid 164-168. Coogan, The Ten Commandments pp. ix-34.
- Reading 23. Coogan, Ten Commandments, pp. 50-93 and 113-133.
- Reading 24. Collins: pp. 611-615. Brettler (CR).