

Hebrew Studies 331: **The Book of Genesis: Where It All Begins**
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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course will study in depth one of the most fascinating and intriguing of all Biblical books: Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible. Our approach will be literary, for the most part, but we will consider classical, medieval commentaries as well.

Modern students of the Bible see many hands involved in the formation of the Hebrew Bible. Still, I will propose that there is a distinctly unified theme that threads its way through Genesis: the creation of a nation, the beginnings of a people, and its unique understanding of its role in history and its relationship to God. We will follow this theme through the stories of Creation, the Flood, and the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, ending with the Joseph saga in the last 14 chapters of Genesis.

The Hebrew Bible is ancient literature that has greatly influenced the course of western civilization as well as some of its most important writers and thinkers for more than two millennia. It gave rise to three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The questions that emerge and with which we will struggle are just as important, therefore, as the answers we might agree upon along the way. Our central concern is not to arrive at a definitive understanding of Genesis; our main purpose is to appreciate the genius and majesty of the biblical writer(s) and of biblical themes and ideas. Our goal is to hear the voice of the biblical writers, to do our best to understand that voice, and to respond to it.

GER Humanities Course criteria and UW System Shared Learning Goal:

Humanities are the academic disciplines that investigate human constructs and values. The humanistic disciplines – such as art history, history, language and literature, philosophy, religious studies, film and media studies – are concerned with questions, issues, and concepts basic to the formation of character and the establishment of values in a human context. They also provide literary, aesthetic, and intellectual experiences that enrich and enlighten human life. In these courses, students will use humanistic means of inquiry, such as: the critical use of sources and evaluation of evidence, the exercise of judgment and expression of ideas, and the organization, logical analysis, and creative use of substantial bodies of knowledge in order to approach the subject of study.

Written assignments [Reflection Papers and Final Paper] will address the University of Wisconsin System Shared Learning Goal of **Critical and Creative Thinking** in the broadest sense of the term, including the ability to question, address, challenge, investigate, problem solve and explore the issues of culture and civilization, religion and Scripture (Jewish, in particular) in ways that highlight the complexity and multifaceted nature of these domains.

Study Group Presentations and In-Class Small Group Activities will address the University of Wisconsin System Shared Learning Goal of **Effective Communications Skill** including listening, speaking, reading and information literacy in terms of the student's ability to interact with and respond to one another's understanding and reaction

to material studied and presented.

COURSE LEARNING GOALS:

This course meets the criteria for GER in Humanities at UWM by engaging students in the reading, analysis, and comprehension of one of the most important texts of Western Civilization: the biblical book of Genesis. Understanding and analyzing the central stories, figures, themes, tropes and historical context of Genesis will provide students a foundation for future engagement with literature, philosophy, religion, and ethics.

Specifically, a student successfully completing this course will be able to:

- Identify the major themes, concerns, and tropes in the book of Genesis (primary assessment: Reflection Papers and Study Group Presentations).
- Analyze and understand the way the biblical text reflects history and myth, poetry and prose, narrative and dialogue, irony and purposeful ambiguity and other dichotomies (primary assessment: Reflection Papers and Final Paper).
- Recognize and appreciate the genius and majesty of the biblical writers and of biblical themes and ideas (primary assessment: Class Discussions, Study Group Presentations and Papers).
- Develop a sense of history, culture, and social context in which themes and tropes that are addressed in Genesis developed and emerged over the course of many centuries (primary assessment: Class Discussions, Study Group Presentations and Papers).
- Be familiar with several methodologies used to study and critically analyze Genesis in relation to other ancient texts such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Babylonian Creation story, etc. (primary assessment: Class Discussions and Papers).
- Engage and interact with the biblical text on a personal level (primary assessment: Class Discussions and Papers).

(See syllabus for specific assignments)

REQUIRED BOOKS

Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996 [ISBN: 0-393-31670-X— \$17.95]

Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996 [ISBN: 0-8052-0253-6 – \$15.95]

[Available at the Panther Bookstore ONLY — 3132 N. Downer, 967-1111 — on the corner of Downer and Hampshire]

Additional assigned articles are on E-Reserve and Traditional Reserve in the library.

GENERAL REQUIREMENTS

--Regular attendance is very important. Sometimes missing class is unavoidable, but if you miss more than three classes, it is your responsibility to contact me to arrange to make up a missed class (typically a two or three page paper or written version of a class activity). Absences that are not made up will affect your final grade.

--Students are expected to have read all assignments before coming to class.

--Students with special needs of any kind should contact me at the beginning of the course so appropriate accommodations can be arranged.

--Feel free to contact me, by phone or email, for any reason; if necessary, we can arrange to meet before class.

-- University policies on academic misconduct, as well as on other issues including procedures for students with disabilities, for students called to active military duty, incomplete work, discriminatory conduct, grade appeal procedures, final examination policy, policies for religious observance, and complaint procedures, may be found at <http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/SecU/SyllabusLinks.pdf>

GRADING

Attendance and Participation:	25%
Two Reflection Papers (four or five pages each):	25%
Study Group Presentations, beginning Week #5 :	25%
Final Research Paper, about 7 pages, due Week #15 :	25%

CLASS SCHEDULE, READING, AND ASSIGNMENTS

Weeks #1 & #2 – Intro/Logistics/Reading an Ancient Text/Historical Context

Reflection Papers, Grading, Assignments, etc.

Reading:

Robert Alter, *Genesis*, “To the Reader,” pp ix-xlvi

Interview with James Kugel [on E-Reserve and Traditional Reserve in library]

Genesis, chapter 1

Weeks #2 & #3 – Ancient Narratives: Mythology or Science or Metaphor or ?

Reading:

Genesis, chapters 2 & 3

Sarna, Introduction and chapter I, pages 1-28

Excerpts from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and *Enuma Elish: The Babylonian Creation Epic*

Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *The Atrahasis Epic and its*

Significance for our Understanding of Genesis, pp 1-9

[last two articles are on E-Reserve and Traditional Reserve in library]

Week #4 – Cain and Abel: Is Cain his Brother’s Keeper?

Reading:
Genesis, chapter 4
Sarna, chapter I, pages 28-32

Week #5 – Noah and The Tower of Babel

Reading:
Genesis, chapters 5 to 11
Sarna, chapter II & III

STUDY GROUP #1 PRESENTATION— Week #5

Weeks #6 & #7 & #8 – Abraham and Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac

Reading:
Genesis, chapters 12 to 23
Sarna, chapters IV thru X

FIRST REFLECTION PAPER DUE— Week #7
STUDY GROUP #2 PRESENTATION— Week #7

*Week #9 – Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah,
and Laban*

Reading:
Genesis, chapters 24-33
Sarna, chapters XI and XII

STUDY GROUP #3 PRESENTATION— Week #9

Weeks #10 & #11 – Rape of Dinah and its Aftermath; Judah and Tamar

Reading:
Genesis, chapters 34-36; chapter 38

SECOND REFLECTION PAPER DUE— Week #11

Weeks #12, #13, #14 & #15 – The Joseph Narrative

Reading:
Genesis, chapters 37-50
Sarna, chapter XIII

STUDY GROUP #4 PRESENTATION— Week #13
STUDY GROUP #5 PRESENTATION— Week #15

FINAL PAPER DUE THE LAST DAY OF CLASS

Major/Minor in Jewish Studies This course is part of the Jewish Studies major and minor. The major offers two tracks: Hebrew Studies and Jewish Cultural Studies (which does not require Hebrew language). With its combination of core courses and electives, the Jewish Studies program allows students to create a course of study that can focus on

religion, culture, Israel, Holocaust, media, or immigration. A dynamic and innovative major, Jewish Studies prepares students to work in our multicultural world. For more information on the Jewish Studies major and minor, please the coordinator, Dr. Rachel N. Baum, rbaum@uwm.edu; 229-5156.

Religious Studies If you are thinking about a major or a double major in Religious Studies, please contact either Peter Paik, Director, at pypaik@uwm.edu or Dr. Judith Beall, Associate Director, at jbeall@uwm.edu.