

Hebrew Scriptures - 2008 Syllabus

Rebecca Lesses

JWST 10300 / RLST 10300

Section 1 MWF 10:00-10:50 Friends 303

Section 2 MWF 11:00-11:50 Friends 303

Course description

The Hebrew Bible (referred to by Christians as the Old Testament) is one of the foundational books of both western and world culture, and serves as the basis for Judaism and Christianity. In this course, we will read the books of the Bible critically as literature, as religious and moral text, and as a source of sociological knowledge. This course surveys the biblical literature, acquaints the students with critical methods for the study of the Bible, situates the Bible within the literature and culture of the ancient Near East, and discusses the religion of ancient Israel. We will deal with questions of history and archaeology, and with questions of meaning – what the biblical text meant to its ancient readers, and what meanings it has today. All texts will be read in English translation.

Course objectives

The primary goal of this course is for you to learn how to interpret the Bible yourself, using the tools you will learn in the course. These tools include:

- careful textual analysis – closely reading biblical texts
- literary approaches to the biblical text – reading biblical texts as stories
- understanding the different genres of biblical texts – narratives, laws, royal chronicles, poetry, theology, etc.
- history of the ancient Near East and how it relates to the writing of the Bible
- analysis of the varieties of religious experience and expression found in the Bible
- comparative analysis of biblical and other ancient Near Eastern texts from related cultures (Egypt, Mesopotamia)
- feminist approaches to the study of the Bible
- awareness of contemporary American culture and the Bible

This primary goal of the course means that you will be learning and applying critical thinking skills, including:

- awareness of the preconceptions and assumptions that you bring to the biblical text
- developing an attitude of curiosity and inquiry
- appreciation of multiple interpretive perspectives
- delving below the surface – not accepting superficial answers
- evaluating texts and other sources – asking questions of a text: who wrote it,

for what reason(s), for what audience(s), using what kind of language, including or ignoring what information

BOOKS FOR PURCHASE

Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) (this book will also be on reserve in the library).

Buy one of these editions of the Bible (not both). Both are also available in the reference section of the library.

1. Harold W. Attridge and the Society Of Biblical Literature, eds., *HarperCollins Study Bible*, HarperOne, 2006
OR
2. Adele Berlin and Marc Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

Additional readings will be available on [Blackboard](#) (see schedule below).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Class attendance and participation: this includes asking questions and speaking up during class discussions, participating in small group work in class, and active listening to lectures and to classmates. You will be graded on class preparation and participation – if you are silent and uninvolved in class, it will lower your grade. 10% of final grade.
2. Map exercise – it will be handed out on Wednesday, September 3 and is due in class on Friday, September 12. 5% of final grade.
3. Short exam early on in semester (given on Blackboard) on basic information: important dates, features of the landscape, and basic facts. 5% of final grade.
4. Chevruta Exercises. Chevruta, a Hebrew word meaning companionship or friendship, is the traditional Jewish way of studying texts. Chevruta partners gather around a text to read it together, argue about it, and try to figure out what it means. We will be using this method many times throughout the semester, both in class and outside it. When the chevruta group meets outside of class, I will ask you to appoint a recorder to report on the discussion and hand in a written report. (15% of final grade).
5. Short paper (2 pages) on a passage from Genesis, due Friday, Sept. 26. Instructions for the paper will be handed out on September 12. 10% of final grade.
6. Midterm Examination – Monday, October 13. 20% of final grade.
7. 6-8 page Research Paper – instructions will be handed out on October 20; it will be due on November 19, in class. 20% of final grade.
8. Two extra-credit events: films that touch on biblical themes – see details in

course schedule. If you attend these films and hand in a one-page reflection paper, you will receive extra credit towards the final grade.

9. Final Examination – It will be given at two different times. 20% of final grade.

10 am section Thursday Dec 18 7:30 am-10:00 am Friends 303

11 am section Tuesday Dec 16 4:30 pm-7:00 pm Friends 303

How this class will be conducted

1. Bring the Bible to class! The main activity of this class will be reading and interpreting the Bible. We will always be referring to the Bible, therefore you must always have a Bible before you in class. Looking on with your neighbor is not sufficient.

2. Bible Translations: Use one of the Bible translations ordered for this class, either the *HarperCollins Study Bible* or the *Jewish Study Bible*. They are available in paperback in the bookstore. Even if you already have your own edition of the Bible, I request that you buy one of these, in order to be able to use the very useful annotations and essays found in these editions.

3. Class preparation is required. This class will be conducted partly as a lecture, partly as small group work, partly as large group discussion. I expect you to come to class having done each day's reading and prepared to say something about it. You will be graded on class preparation and participation – if you are silent and uninvolved in class, it will lower your grade.

4. More on Chevruta. In class or for an outside assignment I will ask you to read a particular text together with another person or persons, so that you can discuss your own questions about the text and spark each other's ideas. This method is taken from the rabbinic way of studying a text, a method that they called chevruta (fellowship). It stems from the idea that learning is acquired best through the active interaction between self, fellow, and text. Your chevruta partners may have different questions than you do, or different answers.

5. Active Listening. Listening to another person speak is not a passive enterprise. Really to understand another person requires paying attention to his or her words, taking notes on what the other person says, making associations with what you already know, asking questions when you don't understand. This is true when you listen to your classmates in small or large group discussions or to my lectures. I expect you to pay attention in class and learn both from your classmates and from my lectures. Take notes. Do not expect simply to remember everything said in class. If you are unfamiliar with taking notes for a class, please speak to me.

Course Policies

1. No plagiarism on papers or cheating on examinations. ALL WRITTEN WORK MUST BE YOUR OWN. Please consult the Student Handbook for a complete statement of the Ithaca College policy on plagiarism, including definitions of

plagiarism and proper citation of sources. Plagiarism includes using another student's paper to write your own, or lending your paper to another student to "help" him or her write the paper (do not do this!). I refer proven cases of plagiarism or cheating to the Judicial Affairs office.

2. Attendance Policy. 2 unexcused absences are permitted; if class must be missed because of illness, athletic exercises, concerts, job interviews, or other unavoidable activities, please let me know with a full explanation and if possible a note from the relevant authority (doctor, coach, chorus leader, Dean of Students office, etc.). More than two unexcused absences will lead to reduction of the course participation grade.

3. Respect for others in the class is required. This includes:

Arrive to class on time.

Turn off your cell-phone before class starts. This includes the "silent" (buzzing) ringer, which is very irritating to listen to.

No text-messaging or playing games on your cell-phone during class.

Don't eat noisy food in class (e.g., potato chips). If you must eat in class, please throw away your trash after class.

Please do not leave the room during class except in case of dire physical need. Respect the instructor and your classmates – listen when they speak and avoid whispering or passing notes in class.

4. All written work must be done to pass the class. This includes exams and papers.

5. If you need help with your writing: Please come speak to me. I also recommend the Writing Center, 228 Park, which is open 9-5 Mon.-Fri. and 7-10 p.m. Sun.-Thurs. To schedule an appointment, call 274-3315.

6. Students with learning disabilities: please approach me early in the semester and let me know your needs in terms of papers or exams. Also, please have the Office for Support Services send me a letter with your specific needs.

7. If you are having personal or family problems, and find it difficult to complete your assignments – please speak to me to set up special arrangements. Please, do not simply stop coming to class!

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Bb=Readings found on the Blackboard site of this course (students are automatically registered for Blackboard).

August 27

First Day of Class

3 Handouts: Syllabus, Comparative translations of Genesis 1, Instructions for Friday's assignment

Aug. 29 How to Read the Bible (Chevruta day)

Bible: Gen. 1-2

Bb: How to Read the Bible; Genesis chapters 1-2; Chevruta Questions on Gen. 1-2.

First assignment due

September 1

Labor Day – No class

Sept. 3 Biblical Creation Story (Chevruta day – prepare before class)

Bible: Gen. 1-3; Coogan, pp. 3-5.

Bb: Characteristics of the Creation Story.

Map Exercise handed out.

Thurs., Sept. 4 Textor, 102, 7:00 p.m. Film showing: “For the Bible Tells Me So” Five Christian families help the audience discover how insightful people of faith handle the realization of having a gay child. The film offers healing, clarity, and understanding to anyone caught in the crosshairs of scripture and sexual identity. (Sponsored by the LGBT Center as part of the “Out of the Closet and Onto the Screen” film series).

Sept. 5 Who wrote the Bible?

Coogan, pp. 21-30; Bible: Gen. 6-8.

Bb: Characteristics of the Flood Story, Flood Story according to the Documentary Hypothesis, Source Documents according to the Documentary Hypothesis

Sept. 8 Ancient Near Eastern creation stories

Coogan, pp. 5-20.

Bb: Ancient Near Eastern Creation Myths.

Assignment: compare biblical creation story with ANE creation myths

Sept. 10 Primeval history: the Flood in the Bible and the Epic of Gilgamesh

Bible: Gen. 4-11; Coogan, pp. 31-42.

Bb: Epic of Gilgamesh

Assignment: compare biblical flood story and Gilgamesh flood story

Sept. 12 Land and History

Coogan, pp. 45-62

Bb: Timeline of Egyptian and Israelite History

Map Exercise due in class.

Short paper assignment handed out.

Sept. 15 Abraham & Sarah; more on source criticism

Bible: Gen. 12-13, 15-17, 20-22; Coogan, pp. 63-69.

Bb: Abraham and Sarah Stories, Genealogy of the Ancestral Families

Sept. 17 Who was Abraham? Traditional Jewish views (Chevruta day)
Bb: Midrash on Abraham

Sept. 19 Jacob & his children; What is form criticism?
Bible: Gen. 25:19-34, 27-34; Coogan, pp. 69-76.

Sept. 22 Joseph and his brothers
Bible: Gen. 37-50; Coogan, pp. 76-83.

Sept. 24 Israel in Egypt
Bible: Ex. 1-15; Coogan, pp. 85-104.
Bb: Issues in the Book of Exodus

Sept. 26 Covenant and Holy Nation
Bible: Ex. 19-24; Coogan, pp. 105-119.
Bb: Revelation and Covenant in Exodus
Short paper assignment due
Handout: questions for Sept. 29 class

Sept. 29 Movie as Midrash: The Ten Commandments of Cecil B. DeMille and Exodus
Bb: Alan Nadel, "God's Law and the Wide Screen: The Ten Commandments as Cold War 'Epic'"; Alicia Ostriker, "Whither Exodus? Movies as Midrash."

October 1 – Second day of Rosh Hashanah – No class

Oct. 3 Issues in Biblical Law: Slavery, Murder, and Gender
Bible: Ex. 21-23; Coogan, pp. 120-125.

Oct. 6 Biblical Law as a contemporary issue: the Ten Commandments in modern America
Bb: James Watts, "Ten Commandments Monuments and the Rivalry of Iconic Texts"; Derek H. Davis, "The Ten Commandments as Public Ritual" (opinion article); Patrick D. Miller, "Is there a place for the Ten Commandments?" (opinion article); "Justices ponder Ten Commandments displays," Christian Century, March 22, 2005, pp. 12-13.

Oct. 8 The Priestly Source 1: sacred places
Bible: Ex. 25-31, 40; Coogan, pp. 125-137.

Oct. 10 Review for Midterm Exam

Oct. 13 Midterm Exam

Oct. 15 The Priestly Source 2: Leviticus and Purity
Bible: Lev 11, 15, 16-19; Coogan, pp. 138-151.
Research paper assignment handed out.

Oct. 17 Fall Break

Oct. 20 Deuteronomy: What is Deuteronomic theology?
Bible: Deut. 1-3 (skim this narrative introduction), 4-7 (theology and Ten Commandments), 12-13 (on idolatry, kosher food laws, true prophecy), 34 (death of Moses).
Coogan, pp. 173-190.
Bb: Deuteronomy
Research paper assignment handed out

Oct. 22 Simchat Torah – No class

Thurs., Oct. 23, Textor 102, 7:00 p.m. Film showing: “Trembling Before G-d”
Shattering assumptions about sexuality, faith, and religion, this film is built around intimately told personal stories of Hasidic and Orthodox Jews who are gay or lesbian. (Sponsored by the LGBT Center as part of the “Out of the Closet and Onto the Screen” film series).

Oct. 24 Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History
Bible: Joshua 1-7; 2 Kings 22-23; Coogan, pp. 191-202
Bb: Deuteronomistic History.

Oct. 27 How did Israel originate as a nation? Biblical text and archaeology
Bible: Joshua 8-10; 12-13; Judges 1-2; Coogan, pp. 202-209, 211-214, 221-226

Oct. 29 Women and death in the book of Judges (Chevruta day)
Bible: Judges 4-5 (Deborah, Yael, and Barak), 11 (Jephthah and his daughter), 13-16 (Samson), 19-21 (the concubine at Gibeah); Coogan, pp. 216-221
Assignment: chevruta groups should each pick one of the stories to read & discuss

Oct. 31 How do you become a king? Saul and David
Bible: 1 Samuel 1, 2:11-3:21, 7:3-11:15; 15 (on Samuel, judge and prophet, and Saul, the first Israelite king); 16-18 (David is anointed king and Saul tries to kill him); Coogan, pp. 231-241.
Assignment: Compare the narratives of Saul and David becoming king – what are the similarities and the differences?

November 3 The Reign of David

Bible: 2 Samuel 2-7, 11-19, 2 Kings 1-2

Coogan, pp. 248-257, 262-264.

Discussion: What do these stories reveal about David, according to the biblical writers?

Nov. 5 Solomon's reign and the royal ideology of the Davidic line

Bible: 1 Kings 1-5, 9-12

Coogan, pp. 261-62, 266-274, 277-284.

Nov. 7 Religion of the monarchy: the Temple

Bible: 1 Kings 6-9 (Temple); Coogan, pp. 260-261, 273-276, 281-282

Bb: article on Ain Dara

Nov. 10 Amos – what is a prophet? (Chevruta day)

Bible: Amos; Coogan, pp. 307-321, 325.

BB: Characteristics of Prophecy

Assignment – work up a definition of prophecy

Nov. 12 Isaiah

Bible: Isaiah 1-12, 29-39; Coogan, pp. 330-336, 342-343.

Bb: Isaiah

Nov. 14 Jeremiah and the end of the monarchy

Bible: Jer. 1-7, 19-20, 25, 30-31, 2 Kings 23:31-25:30; Coogan, pp. 359-377, 381-386.

Bb: Timeline: Fall of Judah

Nov. 17 Return to Zion & Rebuilding of Temple

Bible: Ezra 1-6, Zechariah 3, Isa. 34-35, selections from 40-66; Coogan, pp. 401-423, 427-429

Nov. 19 Messiah in Second Temple period

Bible: Zechariah 9, Isaiah 14, 53, Daniel 7-12

Research Paper due

Nov. 21 NO CLASS – instructor attending Society of Biblical Literature conference

Week of November 24-28 NO CLASSES – Thanksgiving Break

December 1 Worship in the Second Temple

Bible: Psalms 3-5, 19, 24, 30, 72, 80, 91, 97, 121-122, 124; Coogan, pp. 456-472.

Dec. 3 Proverbs

Bible: Proverbs 1-9; Coogan, pp. 468-475

Dec. 5 Ecclesiastes

Bible: Ecclesiastes; Coogan, pp. 490-495

Dec. 8 Esther

Bible: Esther; Coogan, pp. 527-530

Dec. 10 Jonah

Bible: Jonah; Coogan, pp. 525-527

Dec. 12 Last Day of Class

Review for Final Exam

THERE ARE TWO FINAL EXAM DATES FOR THIS COURSE

10 am section Thursday Dec 18 7:30 am-10:00 am Friends 303

11 am section Tuesday Dec 16 4:30 pm-7:00 pm Friends 303