



The Hebrew Bible and History

Instructor: Prof. Mira Balberg

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Office Hours:

TTh 9.30-10.50, via Zoom

Description and goals

It is difficult to think of a book that has been as prominent in the history and culture of the world as the Hebrew Bible (also called the Old Testament). For over two thousand years people have considered the Hebrew Bible – a rich assortment of stories, laws, hymns, prophecies, prayers, and more – to be a source of religious, artistic, and psychological inspiration. But can this book be used as a historical source? In what way were the biblical authors historians, and what are the challenges and limitations of using the Bible as a tool in getting to know ancient civilizations?

The purpose of this course is to introduce you to the richness and diversity of the Hebrew Bible as it is engaged with by historians (as opposed to religious practitioners and believers). Our learning process will be guided by the assumption that the Hebrew Bible consists of many different works, composed at different times and in different historical circumstances, which voice different ideas and concerns.

Course objectives

1. You will learn and understand the historical-academic approach to the study of biblical literature and culture, which is very different from a religious or devotional approach to the Bible.
2. You will acquire good historical literacy in ancient Near Eastern civilizations.
3. You will improve your ability for close reading and analysis of primary texts of a variety of genres.
4. You will improve your written communication skills by submitting well-structured, concise, and well-argued essays that include thesis statements and presentation of evidence.

Course online format

Online learning requires much organization and self-discipline from both the professor and the students, and we will all have to do our best in this unfamiliar situation. It is my responsibility to help you learn as much as possible, in the most effective and enjoyable way possible; it is your responsibility to keep up with the readings and stay involved and engaged even though you are not showing up for class in person.

The lectures for this class are going to be pre-recorded and posted on Canvas so you can watch them at your convenience. Research shows that no one can concentrate on a recorded lecture of 80 minutes, so lectures are usually going to be broken down into smaller segments of about 15-20 minutes each.

The lectures for each week are going to be posted (on the Media Gallery on Canvas) for two weeks only. The idea here is to encourage you to keep up with the course instead of postponing watching

the lectures to the last minute, which would be counterproductive to your success in the course. It's also meant to decrease your dependence on the lectures when you write your essays. I don't want you to quote me: I want to see what you understood and took from the lectures. The PowerPoint slides, however, will remain available to you throughout the quarter, and will be posted on Canvas under "files."

Under no circumstances are you allowed to post the lectures or the presentations *anywhere* or distribute them to people who are not enrolled in the course – this is a violation of intellectual property laws.

The readings are a crucial part of this course. Readings would normally be several chapters from the Hebrew Bible itself. The lectures will be based on the assumption that you have read all the biblical chapters in question and are largely familiar with their content, and they will be hard to follow if this will not be the case. Some of the readings from the Bible will be accompanied by other materials that will be posted on Canvas.

To help you keep up with the readings and the lectures, there is going to be a quiz every week (on Canvas) on the material studied that week. There are going to be 10 quizzes throughout the quarter, each worth 4% of your grade (40% total).

I will hold regular office hours via Zoom on Tuesdays and Thursdays between 9.30–11. I am also open to scheduling online meetings at other times. Please don't hesitate to contact me.

Requirements and evaluation

Materials:

Make sure you have regular and convenient access to a Bible, because we will use it constantly. Please use the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) Translation, which is available at the UCSD bookstore (shipping is free!) or on Amazon. You can also find online editions of the NRSV Bible: <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-NRSV-Bible/>

All additional materials will be posted on Canvas.

You may be interested in acquiring the following:

Michael D. Coogan, *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible in its Context* (New York: Oxford University Press)

Coogan's book could be helpful in keeping up with the class materials, but it is by no means crucial.

Evaluation:

You will be evaluated based on ten quizzes and three short assignments (2–4 pages each). There are no midterm or final exams in this class.

Assignment 1 (due week 3)	20%
Assignment 2 (due week 5)	20%
Assignment 3 (due Week 8)	20%
Quizzes (due every Thursday)	40%

Assignments. Three times during the quarter you will be given a short assignment, in which you will be asked to implement ideas and reading skills we studied in class to specific biblical texts. Each assignment counts for 20% of your final grade.

Note: the assignments must present your own individual work, and any source that you are using must be properly cited. You are permitted (though not encouraged) to consult other sources but you may not copy from them word-for-word. Any suspicion that you have not followed this code of academic integrity will lead to further investigation and potential disciplinary action.

All assignments are to be submitted on Canvas by the assigned deadline. Your grade will be reduced by 1/3 of a letter grade for every day after the deadline, except in a case of medical or family emergency.

Please note that all your submissions will be monitored through a plagiarism detection software (Turnitin).

Weekly Tasks

Week I (3/30–4/3): History and Myth

Watch:

1. Introduction
2. What is the (Hebrew) Bible?
3. Our working contract
4. Is the Bible a history book?
5. Reading the Bible as a historian

Read:

- Genesis 1–3
- Excerpts from the *Enuma Elish*

Watch:

6. What is a myth?
7. The world of the Ancient Near East
8. Creation, water, and sea monsters
9. A comparative approach to biblical myths

Complete:

- Quiz 1 – by Thursday 4/2 at 2 pm

Week II (4/6–4/10): Stories of Origin

Read:

- Genesis 4–11

Watch:

1. A genealogical framework

Read:

- Genesis 6–9 with excerpt from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Watch:

2. The story of the flood from a comparative perspective
3. How many floods? The Documentary Hypothesis

Read:

- Genesis 12–35

Watch:

4. From humanity to a family
5. Are the stories of the patriarchs historically reliable?
6. Patriarchs as symbols: land and progeny
7. Repetitions and multiple versions
8. Introducing assignment #1

Complete:

- Quiz 2 – by Thursday 4/9 at 2 pm

Week III (4/13–4/17): From Canaan to Egypt and back**Read:**

- Genesis Chapters 37–50

Watch:

1. Sibling rivalry in the book of Genesis
2. Ancestral figures and group identity
3. Joseph and the Egyptian connection

Read:

- Exodus 1–15

Watch:

4. The exodus from Egypt: a story of transformations
5. Did the exodus “really happen?”
6. Detective work: who came from Egypt and when?

Complete:

- Quiz 3 – by Thursday 4/16 at 2 pm
- Assignment 1 – by Friday 4/17 at 2 pm

Week IV (4/21–4/24): Covenant, Law, and Ritual**Read:**

- Exodus 16–24

Watch:

1. An itinerary framework
2. Laws in the biblical story
3. What is a covenant?

Read:

- Exodus 21–22 with excerpts from the law code of Hammurapi

Watch:

4. The Covenant Code and the laws of Hammurapi

Watch:

5. The Priestly Code

Read:

- Exodus 25–31, 40
- Leviticus 1–4

Watch:

6. The Priestly Code and the history of religion

Read:

- Leviticus 12–16
- Leviticus 21–25

Watch:

7. The worldview of the priestly authors
8. Dating the priestly Code
9. Introducing assignment #2

Complete:

- Quiz 4 – by Thursday 4/23 at 2 pm

Week V (4/28–5/1): The Conquest of Canaan and the Deuteronomistic History**Watch:**

1. Looking back and ahead

Read:

Deuteronomy 1–7

Watch:

2. The Book of Deuteronomy
3. Deuteronomistic ideology: exclusive and concentrated cult
4. The Deuteronomistic history

Read:

Joshua 1–11, 22–24

Watch:

5. Joshua and the idealized conquest

Read:

- Judges 1–21

Watch:

6. The book of Judges: timeline, content, and structure
7. Life in pre-monarchic Israel
8. The historiography of the book of Judges

Complete:

- Quiz 5 – by Thursday 4/30 at 2 pm
- Assignment 2 – by Friday 5/1 at 2 pm

Week VI (5/4 –5/8): The Beginnings of monarchy**Read:**

- 1 Samuel 1–3, 7–20, 28–31

Watch:

1. The book of Samuel: timeline, content, and structure
2. Biblical models of leadership
3. Monarchy and theocracy
4. Three dimensions of the stories of early monarchy

Read:

- Read: 2 Samuel 1–8, 11–19
- 1 Kings 1–5, 9–11

Watch:

5. David and Solomon: how are they remembered?
6. Complex courtly and family life
7. Historical evidence for the reigns of David and Solomon?

Complete:

- Quiz 6 – by Thursday 5/7 at 2 pm

Week VII (5/11–5/15): The United and Divided Kingdom**Read:**

- 1 Kings 11–22

Watch:

1. The division of the kingdom

Read:

- 2 Kings 3, 9–17

Watch:

2. History of the Northern kingdom
3. Prophets as historical sources
4. The end of the Northern kingdom

Read:

- 2 Kings 17–25

Watch:

5. The Kingdom of Judah from a Deuteronomistic perspective
6. Judah and Assyria: the reign of Hezekiah
7. Reward and punishment for the kings of Judah
8. The bitter end: Judah and Babylonia
9. Introducing Assignment #3

Complete:

- Quiz 7 – by Thursday 5/14 at 2 pm

Week VIII (5/18–5/22): Exile and return**Watch:**

1. The Babylonian exile

Read:

- Ezekiel 1–3, 8–11

Watch:

2. Ezekiel's visions

Read:

- Isaiah 40–49

Watch:

3. Universalism in 2nd Isaiah
4. From Judeans to Jews

Read:

- Ezra 1–10

Watch:

5. The declaration of Cyrus
6. The return movement
7. The Mission of Ezra

Read:

- Ruth 1–4

Watch:

8. The book of Ruth

Complete:

- Quiz 8 – by Thursday 5/21 at 2 pm
- Assignment 2 – by Friday 5/22 at 2 pm

Week IX (5/25–5/29): Under Persian and Greeks**Read:**

- Nehemiah 1–2, 4–5, 8–10

Watch:

1. From Susa to Jerusalem – the story of Nehemiah

Read:

- Esther 1–10

Watch:

2. From Jerusalem to Susa – the story of Esther
3. Judean/Jewish identity in the foreign land

Watch:

4. From Persians to Greeks

Read:

- Daniel 1–7

Watch:

5. The Book of Daniel and its historical context

Read:

- Daniel 8–12

Watch:

6. Greece in Daniel's visions
7. Apocalypse and eschatology

Complete:

- Quiz 9 – by Thursday 5/28 at 2 pm

Week X (6/1–6/5): Under Persian and Greeks**Watch:**

1. Judaism and Hellenism

Read:

- Excerpts from the Letter of Aristeas

Watch:

2. The Septuagint
3. Translation, adaptation, and additions
4. Further literary creation

Watch:

5. The Biblical canon

Read:

- Ecclesiastes 1–12

Watch:

6. Canonization case study: Ecclesiastes

Read:

- Song of Songs 1–8

Watch:

7. Canonization case study: Song of Songs
8. Conclusion

Complete:

- Quiz 10 – by Thursday 6/4 at 2 pm