

## Syllabus: The Hebrew Bible

Shaye J.D. Cohen

Culture and Belief 39

Fall 2013, M., W., (F.), at 10, and a weekly section to be arranged.

This course is a survey of the major books, genres, institutions, and ideas of the Hebrew Bible (commonly called the Old Testament). The course will also treat the historical contexts in which the Bible emerged, and the Bible's role as canonical scripture in Judaism and Christianity.

NB: In this syllabus the word "Bible" refers to the collection of books that Christians call "the Old Testament," that Jews call Tanakh, and that ecumenically-minded and progressive people call "the Hebrew Scriptures" or "the Hebrew Bible." It does NOT refer to the collection of books that Christians call "the New Testament."

*Course reading:* Note that much of the reading consists of biblical texts, which must be read s-l-o-w-l-y.

*Required reading:*

1) Adele Berlin and Marc Brettler, ed., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2005) ISBN: 0195297547.

2) James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now*. NB: You will need your copy of the Bible next to you when you read Kugel. To illustrate the passage under discussion, he frequently cites numerous other biblical passages and you will want to check at least some of them in order to understand the argument.

*Additional resources:*

Prof Cohen's other GenEd course, CB23: *The Hebrew Scriptures in Judaism and Christianity*, is available on Harvard's iTunesU channel: <http://itunes.apple.com/us/course/hebrew-scriptures-in-judaism/id512201207>. Prof Christine Hayes's Yale course *Introduction to the Old Testament* is available on Open Yale Courses: <http://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145>.

## Lectures

### Lecture 1: Reading the Bible.

Reading: Kugel xi-xiv and 1-46; Canons of the Hebrew Bible.

Topics:

Introductory matters: What is the Bible? Different Bibles; The Bible translation that we are using

Ancient Interpreters vs. Modern Bible Scholars and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion;

The Four Assumptions vs. The Tools of Historians, Archeologists, etc.;

How does a historian approach the Bible?

## **Lecture 2: The Bible's Main Ideas.**

Reading: Hayes, excerpt from Lecture 2 (Kaufmann on Polytheism); Wikipedia, "Documentary Hypothesis"; the text which appears on the Basic Ideas timeline when you rollover each of the horizontal bars (also available as a PDF file).

Topics:

The successive eras in biblical history;

A survey of the important people and events;

How the understanding of what's "in control" changed: from polytheism to monolatry to monotheism; from cosmic monism to cosmic dualism ;

The Documentary Hypothesis as an explanation for the history of the Torah (Pentateuch) and an explanation for the history of Israelite religion;

## **Lecture 3: Biblical Chronology and Geography: When and Where.**

Reading: The text which appears on the Ideas timeline (Basic) when you rollover each of the horizontal bars (also available as a PDF file);

Four maps (<http://www.lds.org/scriptures/bible-maps?lang=eng>)

Near East;

The Kingdom(s) of Judah and Israel;

Judaea/Palaestina: 15 required items;

Judaea/Palaestina: contours;

Four timelines:

Overview: Eras and Precipitating Events;

Biblical People and Events;

Biblical Chronology as presented by the Bible Itself (with MBS addendum);

Chronology of Ideas (Basic)

Topics:

Summary of the History of Ideas

## **Lecture 4: The Two Creation Stories.**

Reading: Genesis 1-3; Kugel 47-57; relics of other creation stories in the Bible: Rahav: Isaiah

51:9 [the notation means: book of Isaiah, chapter 51, verse 9]; Psalm 87:4, 89:11; Job 9:13, 26:12;

Yam ("Sea"): Isaiah 50:2; , Psalm 74:13; Job 7:12; Leviathan and Dragon: Isaiah 27:1; Psalm 74:14

Topics:

Translating Genesis 1:1;

Characterizing and contrasting the two stories; their sources;

Traces of other creation stories in the bible;

The meaning of creation;

## **Lecture 5: The Primeval History.**

Reading: Genesis 4-11; Kugel 58-88.

Topics:

"The Fall": Eve and the "apple" -- is the serpent to be identified with "Satan"?

Cain and Abel

Miscegenation

The Flood

The Tower of Babel

### **Lecture 6: A Closer Look at the Flood Story.**

Reading: Richard E. Friedman, at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/bible/flood.html> (be certain to click on "launch interactive" about halfway down); reread Genesis 6-9 (can you see the seams?)

Topics:

Why did the animals die? (What about fish?)

"Pure" and "impure" animals (7:2; 8:20) - cf. Leviticus 11:47

On the prohibition of eating blood (9:4), cf. Leviticus 17:10-14.

Are you convinced by Friedman's analysis? Do you see two versions of the same story woven together? Or, perhaps, a narrator who, for his own stylistic reasons, goes back and forth in his story-telling?

Should pious believers continue to send expeditions to Mt. Ararat in Armenia to search for remains of Noah's ark?

### **Lecture 7: The Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac (and Ishmael); [the Aqedah].**

Reading: Genesis 12-22; Kugel 89-106, 119-132.

Topics:

Did God choose Abra(ha)m or did Abra(ha)m choose God?

Compare the covenant story in Genesis 15 with that in 17.

What is the message of the aqedah story in Genesis 22?

### **Lecture 8: The Patriarchs: Isaac, Jacob (and Esau), and Joseph.**

Reading: Genesis 25-33; 37, 39-50; Kugel 133-162, 176-197. [Note that the Joseph story has a literary unity and polish that the earlier patriarchal stories do not have.]

Topics:

the twelve sons of Israel;

the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Ephraim -- a study in contrasts

Genesis 49:10 - one of the most cryptic verses in the Torah

Joseph -- the first assimilated Israelite

### **Lecture 9: Israel in Egypt.**

Reading: Exodus 1-15; Kugel 198-232.

Topics:

Is the Exodus a historical event? (does it matter? Does it matter to Kugel?)

What is the message of the Exodus narrative as a whole?

Why did Moses need to bring ten plagues against the Egyptians -- couldn't God have taken care of them all at once?

Why did God harden the pharaoh's heart?

### **Lecture 10: Revelation at Mount Sinai; Decalogue (Ten Commandments) and Laws.**

Reading: Exodus 19-24; the three Decalogues: Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5, Exodus 34; Kugel 240-279.

Topics:

What is the significance of the Decalogue?

What is "the book of the covenant"?

How do the different versions of the Decalogue differ from each other?

**Lecture 11: Dissidence in the Desert.**

Reading: Kugel 236-240, 281-284, 328-334, 336-340; Exodus 15:22-17:7 (no water, no food; manna; Moses strikes the rock); Exodus 31:18; 32-34 (the golden calf; Moses importunes God); Numbers 11-12 (no food; manna; Miriam and Aaron); Numbers 13-14 spies; Numbers 16-17 (Korah; Dathan and Aviram); Numbers 20:1-13 (no water; Moses strikes the rock); Numbers 21:4-9 (bronze serpent); Numbers 22-25 (Balaam; Baal Peor)

Topics:

Why do the Israelites rebel so often against the authority of Moses (and Aaron)? What is the meaning of all these rebellions? Why do the Israelites build images of calves – are these images idolatrous or are they meant to be images of YHWH?

**Lecture 12: The Priestly Stratum (P).**

Reading: Leviticus 11 and 15 (purity), 16 (Day of Atonement), 19 (Holiness), 23 (calendar); Numbers 19 (Red Cow); Kugel 284-289.

Topics:

Consider:

Is priestly religion “a religion of law”?

Can you make sense of priestly religion and its rituals?

Can you make sense of the juxtapositions and transitions in Leviticus 19?

**Lecture 13: Deuteronomy (D).**

Reading: Deuteronomy’s theology of history: Deuteronomy 4; 10:12-11:32; 28; centralization of the cult: Deuteronomy 12; the writing and studying of the Torah: Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 31:7-13; Kugel 296-316.

Topics:

Contrast P and D.

Which is earlier: P or D? What is at stake in this debate?

What are the distinctive hallmarks of D?

**Lecture 14: The Image of God and the Name of God in these Texts.**

Reading: Genesis 32 (Jacob and the angel); Exodus 3:13-15, 6:2 (re name of God); Exodus 31:18 (the allure of idolatry); Exodus 3:19 (hardening of Pharaoh’s heart); Kugel 107-118, 159-162, 209-216, 413-435.

Topics:

What are the different images of God that Kugel sees in the Bible?

Who or what are angels?

Do humans have free will?

Is God omnipotent?

What are the different names of God and what do they mean?

**Lecture 15: Joshua and Judges.**

Reading: Joshua at Jericho and Ai: Joshua 1-2; 5-8; the Judges: Judges 1-5; treatment of Canaanites (and Amalek): Joshua 6:21, 8:22-26; cf. Deuteronomy 7:1-2, 20:16-18, 25:17-19; 1 Samuel 15; Kugel 368-385.

Topics:

Did the Israelites conquer the land of Canaan?

Are the Israelites guilty of ethnic cleansing or genocide?

Contrast the story of Jericho and the story of Ai – wherein is God's power revealed?

Is Joshua a worthy successor to Moses?

### **Lecture 16: Saul, Samuel, David, Solomon.**

Reading: Saul: 1 Samuel 9-12; 15; 28; David: 1 Samuel 16-18; 2 Samuel 11-12. [who really killed Goliath? See 2 Samuel 21:15-22]; Criticism of Solomon: 1 Samuel 8; Royal ideology of Davidic kingship: 2 Samuel 7; the glory of Solomon: 1 Kings 3; 5; 10-11; Kugel 474-505.

Topics:

Why did Samuel reject Saul?

Do you think that David was better than Saul?

Why does David seem to be cut more slack than Saul?

### **Lecture 17: The Divided Monarchy; Tales of the Prophets.**

Reading: Elijah: 1 Kings 18; Elisha 2 Kings 2; 4; the Northern kingdom: 1 Kings 12; 13:1-10, 33-34 [chapter 13 verses 1-10 and verses 33-34]; 14; 21; 2 Kings 14:23-29; 17:1-23; the Assyrian attack on Jerusalem, Manasseh; Josiah: 2 Kings 18-23; Kugel 519-535.

Topics:

How would you characterize Elijah and Elisha – what kind of “prophets” are they?

According to the book of Kings what caused the downfall of the northern kingdom?

How did Jerusalem escape capture by the Assyrians – or did it?

Why in the end did Jerusalem fall to the Babylonians?

### **Lectures 18 and 19: Overview of the Literary Prophets: Five Main Themes.**

Reading: Hosea 2-3; 6:6; Isaiah 1; 10; Amos 4; 5:18-27; 6; Isaiah 40; 44-45; 52:13-53:12; 58; Jeremiah 7; 25; 26; 29; 31; Ezekiel 6; 18; 33; 37; JSB pp. 455-461 (Introduction to Nevi'im, beginning with “The Latter Prophets and their Order”) and pp. 780-784 (Introduction to Isaiah); Kugel 438-442 what is prophecy 618-626 (Hosea and Amos) 538-555 Isaiahs 555-568 suffering servant

Topics:

Introduction to the literary prophets. Five themes:

- 1) Divine exclusivity, monolatry, monotheism;
- 2) Ritual and ethics, social justice;
- 3) Reward and punishment;
- 4) Israel and the nations;
- 5) The future, wonderful and dreadful

What is the significance of the literary prophets?

What is their message?

Do the prophets oppose the ritual of the Temple?

Why do the prophets spend so much time talking to/about the nations?

Are the prophets future-tellers?

What does the future hold according to the prophets?

**Lecture 20: Overview of Ketuvim. "The Writings": Wisdom literature; Psalms.**

Reading: Kugel 458-473 (Psalms of David); 506-514 Wisdom literature; Proverbs 1; 8; 10; 22:17-24:22; Psalms: Psalm of Individual Lament: 51; Communal Lament: 74 and 137; Trust: 23; Thanksgiving: 145, 146; Divine Kingship: 97; Human Kingship: 2, 110; Pilgrimage: 122; Mythological: 29, 82.

How would the author of the Deuteronomistic History respond to the book of Proverbs?

How does the message of Qohelet compare with that of Proverbs?

What exactly is Wisdom Literature?

What is gained by classifying the Psalms into various types?

**Lecture 21: Job.**

Reading: Job 1-3, 28, 38-42; Kugel 635-643.

Topics:

Satan;

The Theodicy Problem;

Other biblical texts with "satan":

1 Kings 11:14, 23, 25;

Psalm 109:6;

Zechariah 3:1-2;

Numbers 22:22, 32

You may wish to listen to all or part (esp. minutes 1-25) of a recent radio program about the book of Job: <http://onpoint.wbur.org/2013/10/10/book-of-job>.

What is the message of the book of Job?

How does the book explain the mystery of undeserved suffering?

**Lecture 22: Daniel.**

Reading: Kugel 652-661; Daniel 1, 3, 7, 10-12.

Topics:

Narratives and visions;

Prophecy;

Wisdom;

Apocalyptic.

In Christian Bibles the book of Daniel is included among the prophets but in Jewish Bibles it is not; can you explain this difference?

What are the court tales of Daniel?

It is sometimes said that the court tales present Daniel as a model diaspora Jew; do you agree?

What is the message of the visions?

Who or what is "the one like a son of man" in Daniel 7?

**Lecture 23: The Hebrew Bible in Judaism.**

Reading: JSB 1863-1875 ("Midrash and Midrashic Interpretation" by David Stern); JSB 1929-1937 (The Bible in the Synagogue" by Avigdor Shinan).

Topics:

The Torah as the foundation of Judaism

Cosmic monism

**Lecture 24: The Hebrew Bible in Christianity.**

Reading: Oxford Companion to Christian Thought s.v. "Old Testament" (by Hugh S. Pyper);

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lecture> (somewhat technical, get the gist);

[http://www.vocationnetwork.org/ask\\_alice/53](http://www.vocationnetwork.org/ask_alice/53) (very untechnical).

Topics:

Prophetic universalism as the foundation of Christianity

Cosmic dualism, apocalyptic, Satan;

Why is the Hebrew Bible part of Christian scripture?

Contrast Christian attitudes towards the Hebrew Bible ("Old Testament") with Jewish ones.

**Lecture 25: Conclusions and Reflections.**

Reading: Kugel 662-689

Can one be a traditionalist, a believer in God and in the truth of the Bible, and yet maintain a modern scholarly approach?

James Kugel seems to say no. Do you agree?