

RLST 110-01: Understanding Scripture

Spring Term 2008
MW 6:10PM-8:05PM
Hirt Academic Center M213

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Office Hours: MW: 4-6;
TTh: 12:30-1:30
F: By Appointment

Course Description: This course fulfills **one Common Core** requirement (Common Core 9: Religious Traditions) in "modes of inquiry and methods of interpretation."

The writings that make up the collection we call the Bible have had a remarkable impact on literature, art, music, law, ethics, and a multitude of other areas. Quite apart from a discussion of their sacred status, these writings demand that educated people understand them.

In order to make the most of our time together, this class is divided into several units. First we will discuss canon formation, textual issues, and biblical history and geography. We will then compare five modes of discourse that are present in various biblical texts: Creation, Law and Cult, Prophecy, Wisdom, and Apocalypticism. Lastly, we examine the continuation of biblical storylines in the Qur'an. By taking such a thematic and comparative approach we will better be able to understand the similarities and differences among the multiple voices that make up the Bible.

In this class we will examine biblical texts primarily through the lenses of history and rhetoric. That is, we will explore the social and cultural context of these writings and discuss how they go about making the claims they do. In structuring the class in this way we will not evaluate these texts from a confessional standpoint. Our goal is not to determine whether these texts are "true" in some absolute sense. For those students who regard the Bible (one or two testaments) as Scripture, this class may inform and deepen their religious views, although that is not its primary objective. For those students who do not regard these writings as personally sacred, this class provides insight into writings that have generated and sustained historically important religious traditions.

Learning Objectives: At the end of the term the student will be able to:

- **Explain** how the Bible developed.
- **Describe** five biblical modes of discourse.
- **Compare** the multiple voices found in biblical texts.
- **Analyze** how earlier texts and traditions are reconfigured by later texts.
- **Compose** clear and coherent biblical interpretations.

By remaining in this class past the drop/add period the student has affirmed that she/he has read the syllabus and understands her/his responsibilities.

Blackboard: This class makes use of Mercyhurst's online teaching resources by having a Blackboard (Bb) site. All students who are enrolled in this class will be able to access this site. **The student is responsible for checking the Announcements page on our Bb site as well as her or his Mercyhurst e-mail account.**

Classroom Etiquette: The function of this class, like all classes at Mercyhurst College, is to further the student's intellectual development. This can only be achieved in an atmosphere of openness and respect. Thus it is incumbent upon each of us to keep an open mind, to listen to different viewpoints and opinions, and to put forward our own ideas. To avoid unnecessary distractions, please turn off all cell phones and other electronic devices that might interrupt conversation. Eating and drinking in class should be avoided, or at least kept to a minimum (if it is necessary, please do so quietly).

Course Requirements and Evaluation:

1. **Attendance – 5%:** This class is based on the idea that students learn by actively participating in the learning process. You cannot be an active participant in your own learning if you are not in class. I do understand, however, that life happens and that you may need to miss class. Each student is allowed **2 missed classes** without penalty. I don't need to know why you're absent. You only get two free absences, so use them wisely. Each missed class after this (**no matter the reason**) results in your grade for this portion of the class being lowered. 3 absences = B; 4 absences = C; 5 absences = D; 6 absences = F; **more than 6 absences will result in an F for the entire course.**
2. **Participation – 5%:** In addition to merely being present, it is essential that the student participate in class discussions by making observations, posing questions, suggesting hypotheses, and actively listening. In order to be able to do these things, I expect that the student will read the discussion board questions (see below) and take notes as she/he reads. Students who participate at least once a week will receive an A for this portion of the class; students who participate every couple of weeks will receive a B for this portion of the class; students who rarely or never participate will receive a C for this portion of the class. Additionally, negative participation (arriving late, sleeping, disrupting class, etc.) can cause the student's grade for this portion of the class to be lowered. **Every two late arrivals will lower this portion of your grade by ONE LETTER.**
3. **Discussion Board – 5%:** In order to help the student to prepare for class and to interact meaningfully with the readings, she/he will be expected to respond to 8 (eight) prompts on the Discussion Board found on our Bb site (8 responses = A; 7 = B+, 6 = B, and so on). These responses can be brief (a few sentences), but must show evidence of engaging the question and the reading. The responses are due by 3:00pm on the day due. Students should feel free to respond to other students' submissions, **but each student must do her/his own work.** Ideally, this aspect of the class provides a forum for students to try out ideas and respond to one another. Be prepared to share your responses in class. Even if you do not write a response to a particular prompt, you will be expected to have read the prompt and be prepared to speak about it in class. **No late submissions are accepted!**

4. **Interpretation Labs– 5%:** This class is based on the principle that students learn to interpret biblical texts by practicing it. Each student will thus be placed in a small group in order to collaborate on interpretation labs during class. Each student will receive a lab sheet that she/he is expected to fill out, with the help of her/his lab partners. These lab reports will be handed in. Successful completion of all these labs will result in an A for this portion of the class. Each missed/incomplete lab (excluding two "graces") will result in the student's grade being lowered: 3 missed/unsatisfactory = B, 4 = C, 5 = D, 6 = 0). **You must be in class to complete these labs! No make-up work is allowed.**
5. **Critical Reflection – 5%:** Recognizing that every student has different learning styles, this portion of the course grade enables the student to make a choice. BOTH of the choices will challenge the student to reflect critically on the readings, albeit in different ways. The student will choose **ONE** of the following:
- Weekly Reflections:** Each Wednesday (with the exception of the first) the student is to turn in a page long reflection (200-400 words) on the week's reading and work **as well as** send it to the Digital Dropbox on our Bb site. You must do BOTH to receive full credit. What did you learn? What was challenging? What questions do you still have? Etc. Please write in **complete sentences**. Successful completion of all the reflections will result in an A for this portion of the class. Each missed/incomplete reflection (excluding one "grace") will result in the student's grade being lowered by one grade level (2 missed/unsatisfactory = B+, 3 = B, 4 = C+ and so on). **No late reflections will be accepted!**
 - Service Learning:** Through the service learning office and at the direction of Sister Michele Schroeck, the student will fill out a service learning contract, perform the required 10 hours of community service over the course of the term, hand in the verification form, and then write and hand in a 2-3 page essay reflecting critically on the service learning project and how it relates to the texts we read in class. This is NOT to be a "religious testimonial," but rather a way for students to think about biblical texts through practical service – a different mode of learning than simply reading the texts. The essay will be due on in class **Wednesday, 4/30** and the Service Learning verification forms are due in the Service Learning Office on **Thursday 5/1**. The student will hand in hard copy of the essay **as well as** send it to the Digital Dropbox on our Bb site. Satisfactory completion of service and essay = A; Unsatisfactory essay = B; Unsatisfactory service = C; etc.
- The student will fill out and sign a learning contract by **Monday, 3/10** noting which of these options she/he will chose.
6. **Interpretation Essays – 30%:** A major goal of this class is for the student to learn how to write knowledgeable interpretations of biblical texts. In order to facilitate this goal, two interpretive essays are required. The student is to hand in a hard copy of these essays in class **as well as** send an electronic copy to the Digital Dropbox on the due date.
- Descriptive Essay – 10%:** In an essay of 2-3 pages (Double-Spaced, Times New Roman 12 pt. font) the student will be asked to **describe** (not summarize!) a biblical text accurately.
 - Comparative Essay – 20%:** In an essay of 3-4 pages (Double-Spaced, Times New Roman 12 pt. font) the student will be asked to **compare** two biblical texts carefully.

7. **Quizzes – 25%:** There will be five (5) quizzes given in this class as noted on the course outline.
8. **Final Examination – 20%:** The final exam will be cumulative. It is scheduled for Monday, 5/12 at 6:00PM.

Grading Scale: The grading scale for this course follows that found in the Mercyhurst College Catalogue. A fuller description of this grading scale can be found by clicking on the "Documents" tab on our Bb site.

Re-write Policy: Each student may re-write the essays if she/he is not satisfied with the grade. When turning in the re-written essay the student **MUST** attached the original essay with my comments on it. The final grade the student receives will be the **average** of the grade on the original essay and that of the re-written essay and can be no higher than a B+. **Only one** re-write is allowed for each essay. The re-written DESCRIPTIVE essay is due ONE WEEK after the student receives the graded essay back. The re-written COMPARATIVE essay is due on the day of the final. **Late essays CANNOT be re-written.**

Late Essays: The student loses one grade level every day an essay is late.

Make Up Policy: The student is allowed one make up quiz without penalty. The student loses 15% on every make-up quiz after the first. The student **MUST** contact me before the next class day to schedule a make up or she/he will receive a zero for the quiz. In order to make up the Final Exam, the student needs a signed excuse from the Dean.

Learning Differences: Students who require learning accommodations related to this course should contact Ms. Dianne D. Rogers, the director of the Learning Differences Program, at 814-824-2450. No accommodations can be made by the instructor unless the student goes through this office.

Academic Honesty: Students are expected to abide by the principles of academic honesty as articulated in the Mercyhurst College Catalogue and the Mercyhurst Student Handbook. **Plagiarism will result in an F for the assignment and possibly an F for the entire course.**

Required Texts (available in the Mercyhurst College Bookstore):

The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, 3d ed. Edited by Michael Coogan et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, or the "Augmented" 2007 edition. **(NOAB)**
[Yes, you must have *this* particular Bible and one of *these* particular editions.]

John J. Collins. *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. **(Collins)**

COURSE SCHEDULE:***In the Beginning**

Mon. 3/3 Introduction to the Class: The Importance of the Hebrew Bible
READ THE SYLLABUS!
READ: "How to Cite Biblical Texts" (on Bb)

Unit 1. Canon Formation: How the Bible Came to Be

Wed. 3/5	READ:	DUE:
Different Canons, Different Bibles Interpreting the Bible	Collins: 302-306; 1-6, 12-14 NOAB: 453-460; 471-484 Essays	Discussion Board (DB) #1

Mon. 3/10	READ:	DUE:
Biblical Geography and History Textual Criticism: Do We Have the Original?	Collins: 6-10, 15-27 NOAB: 460-466; 505-507 Essays Visit: " Interpreting Ancient Manuscripts ": http://www.earlham.edu/~seidti/iam/interp_mss.html (You can get to this link via the "External Links" tab on Bb – explore the site a bit)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DB #2 • Learning Contract (to Dr. von Thaden) • Service Learning Forms Due (to Sr. Michele)

Unit 2. Creation

Wed. 3/12	STUDY:	DUE:
Introducing Creation: Creation and Sea Monsters <u>Enuma Elish</u>	**QUIZ # 1**	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study • Reflection #1

Mon. 3/17	READ:	DUE:
Creation in Jewish Writings	Collins: 28-43 Genesis 1-3 Proverbs 8 Sirach 16:24-18:6	DB #3

* Please Note: This schedule is subject to change at the instructor's discretion.

Wed. 3/19	READ:	DUE:
Creation Reconfigured in Christian Writings	John Intro.; 1:1-18 Colossians Intro.; 1:1-23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DB #4 • Reflection #2

Unit 3. Law and Cult

Mon. 3/24	STUDY:	DUE:
Introducing Law and Cult	**QUIZ # 2**	Study

Wed. 3/26	READ:	DUE:
Law and Cult in Jewish Writings	Collins: 64-83; <u>Key Points:</u> 44, 55, 84 Exodus 19-22 Deuteronomy 28-30 Leviticus 1-5; 11, 15, 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DB #5 • Reflection #3

Mon. 3/31	READ:	DUE:
Law and Cult Reconfigured in Christian Writings	Matthew Intro.; 5:17-47 Acts Intro.; 10, 15 Colossians Intro.; 3:12-4:1	DB #6 <u>DESCRIPTIVE ESSAY:</u> <u>DUE BY 5:00PM</u>

Unit 4. Prophecy

Wed. 4/2	STUDY:	DUE:
Introducing Prophecy	**QUIZ # 3**	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study • Reflection #4

Mon. 4/7	READ:	DUE:
Prophecy in Jewish Writings	Collins: 141-163, 197-208; <u>Key Points:</u> 94, 108, 164 1 Kings 17-19 2 Kings 1-5 Amos 1-2; 5-6 Isaiah 1-3, 45, 58, 61	DB #7

Wed. 4/9	READ:	DUE:
Prophecy Reconfigured in Christian Writings	Mark Intro.; 1:1-14 Luke Intro.; 4 Romans Intro.; 1:1-6; 16:25-27 1 Corinthians Intro.; 14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DB #8 • Reflection #5

Unit 5. Wisdom

Mon. 4/14	STUDY:	DUE:
Introducing Wisdom	**QUIZ # 4**	Study

Wed. 4/16	READ:	DUE:
Wisdom in Jewish Writings	Collins: 133-140, 248-255, 262-266, 293-301 Proverbs 1-10 Ecclesiastes 1-4, 8-9, 12 Sirach Prologue Wisdom of Solomon 1-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DB #9 • Reflection #6

Mon. 4/21	READ:	DUE:
Wisdom Reconfigured in Christian Writing	Matthew Intro.; 5-7 Luke Intro.; 6:12-49 1 Corinthians Intro.; 1-4 James Intro.; 1-5	DB #10

Unit 6. Apocalypticism

Wed. 4/23	STUDY:	DUE:
Introducing Apocalypticism	**QUIZ # 5**	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study • Reflection #7

Mon. 4/28	READ:	DUE:
Apocalypticism in Jewish Writings	Collins: 278-292 Daniel 1-4, 7, 12 2 Esdras 3-5; 10-11; 14	DB #11 <u>COMPARATIVE ESSAY:</u> <u>DUE BY 5:00PM</u>

Wed. 4/30	READ:	DUE:
Apocalypticism Reconfigured in Christian Writings	Mark Intro.; 13 Revelation Intro.; 1-6; 12:18-13:18; 17-18; 21-22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DB #12 • Reflection #8 • <u>Service Learning Essay</u> • Service Learning Verification due 5/1 (to Service Learning Office)

Unit 7. Comparing the Bible & the Qur'an

Mon. 5/6	READ:	DUE:
Continuing Biblical Storylines: The Qur'an	"A Prolegomenon to the Relation of the Qur'an and the Bible ," by Vernon K. Robbins & Gordon D. Newby (Bb) Qur'an 11, 19, 21 (Bb)	DB #13

The End

Wed. 5/7	READ:	DUE:
Last Day of Class: Reflection and Evaluation	Review readings and class notes.	Reflection #9

Mon. 5/12

FINAL EXAMINATION: 6:00PM