HEBREW SCRIPTURES: STMM 526 **Fall 2009**

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Through working with a variety of texts, students are exposed to the three major parts of the Hebrew Bible: Pentateuch, Prophets and Writings. The pluralism of viewpoints that come to expression in the biblical tradition leads to an examination of tensions, strengths and limits involved. Practical consequences for Christian belief and practice will be developed.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

1. Experience working personally with a variety of biblical texts in order to gain reading skills—becoming a self-conscious reader

2. Within this variety of texts, understand the reasons for the major pieces of Hebrew Bible: pentateuch, prophets, writings.

3. Proceed with curiosity, imagination, questions and openness to a variety of ways to read any text instead of mining for one definitive interpretation.

4. Focus particularly on close-reading skills and a literary approach to the text.

5. Work with the pluralism of viewpoints in the religious expressions of Scripture and examine the tensions, strengths and limits involved.

6. Gain sensitivity about modern Judaism as the direct inheritor and contemporary practitioner of the traditions in Hebrew Bible.

CRITERIA: or, how do I work toward grades?

1) attendance: With so few contact opportunities, lots of water goes under the bridge each session. Excusing causes for an absence can exist.

2) participation: Not only in attention to the back and forth of questioning, but also in the discussion groups we attempt here during our three-hour sessions.

3) worksheet/reactions: Half of the grade results from the written work submitted each week; namely, 500 words detailing your experience, reactions, learnings from dealing with the assigned biblical texts for that week. More in class about how to submit this on-line, etc.

4) final synthesis paper: Due on the final class day, hard copy only. Guidelines are on a separate sheet. Either enclose a stamped, return envelope or look for your paper in the returned papers file at the STM office.

"biblical texts… as rescued responses
to the initiating presence and mystery of God
in the course of human life." Michael Fishbane

PLEASE BRING A COPY OF THIS SYLLABUS TO CLASS

TEXT: the book of the Scriptures

Each student should have a ***Jewish Study Bible*** (New York: Oxford: 2004) . The translation is the Jewish Publication Society TANAKH (1995) and the comments are from current scholars who know both their Scriptures and their Talmud.

Also, one of the following:

- ***HarperCollins Study Bible*** (Rev updated ed; New York: HarperOne, 2006)
- ***The New Oxford Annotated Bible*** (3rd ed; New York: Oxford, 2001)
- ***The New Interpreter's Study Bible*** (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003)

Be sure you get a complete text, i.e. with the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical books. All three of these use the New Revised Standard Version translation and with some crossover in scholars, largely Christian commentators on the individual biblical books.

TERM
At the last minute a word is waiting
not heard that way before and not to be
repeated or ever be remembered
one that always had been a household word
used in speaking of the ordinary
everyday recurrences of living
not newly chosen or long considered
or a matter for comment afterward
who would ever have thought it was the one
saying itself from the beginning through
all its uses and circumstances to
utter at last that meaning of its own
for which it had long been the only word
though it seems now that any word would do

--W. S. Merwin

TEXTBOOK

Many titles will be recommended along the way, but the only required textbook for the course—besides the two bible commentaries—is Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY:WestminsterJohnKnox, 2003).

WORKSHEETS: 500 words a week—your personal journal record for the course

Every week portions of the biblical text are assigned. Read these first before you start trying to learn about them. Marginal notes and commentaries can come later, but you need to generate your own reactions and questions first, before other authors suggest meanings. The worksheets will record your efforts in this line.

The task, in a nutshell, is to see what the text actually says and how it says it—an exercise called close reading. Then, try to describe what the text does to you—puzzles, angers, delights, upsets. Document what words or phrases in the text provoke this reaction? Notice how different this is from finding meaning and preaching or doing theological reflection.

Recording your reactions in complete sentences is better than single words or an outline format; that is, learn to express yourself with proper grammar and syntax. Your computer file memory will be a nice resource for the final paper. My commitment will be reading and highlighting your work and getting it returned in a timely fashion.

Here are some fairly standard heuristic stating points for interacting with a text:

- **WHAT KIND OF TEXT IS THIS?** This question inquires about genre. Am I reading prose or poetry? What kind of prose: narrative, instruction, legal code, liturgical prayer, etc.? What difference does that make? Is the language declarative, imperative, execrative, confessional, etc.?

- **WHERE IS THE EMPHASIS?** Which idea gets the most words in the passage, holds the position of importance (beginning, ending)? What's the ordering of ideas--ie. what's subordinated, indeed, what is not said at all? (What did I expect to hear, but found no mention of in the text?)

- **WHAT PROBLEM SITUATION SUBSISTS?** If this text is the answer, what's the question? If this text resolves the matter, what was the problem situation?

- **WHO CARES?** For whom does this text make a difference? Who would want to keep this text as part of the sacred tradition? This is a question about authors and about audiences--both have a hand in the final form and preservation of texts.

- **WHAT DOES THIS TEXT SAY TO US WITH OUR BACKS AGAINST THE WALL?** In danger or crisis or changing times, what still rings true?

- **WHAT TRUTH FOR OUR SALVATION IS HERE?** Numbers of faith traditions struggle with this one. Surely Scripture is more than a literary text, but how? The Roman Catholic document on revelation (Dei Verbum, no.11) from the Second Vatican Council states:

  > "...the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation."

  Not every small unit will yield up such a truth, but the principle is still a valuable guide. "Our salvation" exceeds "my" personal vision of what life with God means. Enlarging and enriching one's biblical horizon depends upon openness to these different points of view.

- **AT THE END**, in the final 100 words of your essay, you can add hints about meaning, what truth you find (as noted above), or some other lesson you found useful from the marginal notes. But stay in the range of the Hebrew Bible—we're not ready yet for finding Christ in the Old Testament.

OUTLINE OF TOPICS AND TEXTS FOR EACH WEEK: subject to revision

1. Introduction: appreciating the syllabus; how to ask the Bible questions it can answer; reading Scripture in a non-literal way—the question of "us and them"; living tradition vs. history that is past, locating the reader.
****Deut 26:5-10**. [liturgical, credal form] [no 500 word worksheet needed on this text]

2. Law and Gospel: morality as fidelity to the story.
****Exod 19-24 and 34**. [legal forms]

3. Ancestor stories of grace (J) and responsibility (E).
****Gen 12, 20, 26:6-11, and 22**. [narrative forms]

4. The Deuteronomist: an exercise in theological reflection.
****Deut 10:12-11:17, 6:4-25, 8:1-20, and 4:1-40**. [homiletic forms]

5. Prophets as the prosecutors of God's court case with the people of the covenant.
****Isa 1:21-26, Jer 1 and 7:1-15**. [oracular forms, covenantal forms]

6. True and False Prophets: decisions in tension.
****Jer 28, Micah 4:9-5:15, I Kgs 22**. [combination forms]

7. Israel at prayer: God the Creator, God the Redeemer.
****Pss 145, 29, 142** and your own **favorite psalm**. [liturgical forms, Hebrew poetry]

8. Wisdom traditions: religion vs. reason.
****Qoh 1, Job 3 and 38-42**. [wisdom poetry]

9. Apocalyptic: visionaries vs. pragmatists.
****Dan 7, Isa 65-66**. [apocalyptic forms]

10. Overview and review. [Wed morning students will not have this session.]

GUIDELINES FOR FINAL ASSIGNMENT—due at the final class session

Think of this course-completion synthesis paper as your opportunity for reporting to the people who paid your tuition for this course. They wonder what you're learning, also how and whether that will make any difference when school is over.

Your report needs to be 6-8 typed pages [no smaller than 10 point typeface, please], double-spaced and in hard copy. Build your report around these three focal points:

1) **the biblical text** (choose a selected passage or a biblical book to support and illustrate your report instead of speaking in generalities)--

How has your thinking about this specific text changed—perhaps, before and after?
Has your list of favorite texts and forgettable texts changed?
What new insight about texts seems really important to you?
What areas of Hebrew Bible have made you interested to find out more about them?

2) **yourself as a reader**--

How would you characterize yourself as a reader?
How distinguish yourself from a fundamentalist, literalist reader?
Can you list some of your strengths as a reader, gifts you bring to texts?
On the other side, where are limits, what do you need practice at?
Can you highlight any "before the course" and "after the course" differences? (Some brief excerpts from your weekly worksheets might be evidence of the process.)

3) **the ministry you exercise**--

Where do learnings from this course touch on your ministry?
How will any insights change your understanding or decisions about ministry?

The sub-questions under each topic are only suggestions to get your thinking started.

You could choose a biblical passage as a focus piece and work out your reflections in light of that text: what the text says to me now, how that understanding exemplifies my different way of reading and how that will make a difference when I am at work in ministry. Your favorite translation of the text you talk about would make a nice attachment as an appendix—that way it wouldn't count against your limited space for reflection and synthesis.

GRADING: On a separate page, please add a paragraph or two about what grade you think you have earned and why. Factors include attendance, participation, worksheets, and final paper. A **B** grade indicates satisfactory completion of all the components. This would be the typical grade and means you are holding your own in graduate school. An **A** grade indicates an outstanding achievement in these areas, not simply greater effort. For instance, why is your written work so exceptional? I will need to be convinced. Plus and minus may be used.