The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: Then and Now
Brandeis University

Marc Brettler
Email: brettler@brandeis
Office Hours: By appointment.
Web Page: people.brandeis.edu/~brettler

The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is a complex compilation of material, reflecting a millennium of beliefs, desires, and norms from ancient Israel. In this course, we begin to understand this diversity of material, and the various approaches that have been taken in the scholarly world toward it. We will accomplish this by reading a significant portion of the Hebrew Bible in English, along with representative selections from secondary literature. In addition, we will look at selections of modern “texts” (e.g., court cases, artistic works, films, song, etc.) that interpret the Bible to develop an understanding of the difference between what the Bible once meant, and what it now means.

The main goals of this class are:

- To learn how to analyze and understand a culture that is different from our own, and reflects values of a different era and geographical location.
- To see how different cultures interacted in antiquity.
- To understand how ancient cultures continue to inform contemporary life.
- To appreciate the role of the Bible as a core text in American life.
- To become more aware of how different post-biblical cultures, especially Judaism and Christianity, have used the same core text in very different ways.

The class will meet on-line once a week for 14 or 15 weeks for 1.5 hours. You will be expected to prepare for each class meeting by completing all the weekly assignments, including reading, looking at and listening to related material (written works, court cases, artistic works, films, song, etc.), and handing in assignments.

Course requirements include engaged attendance for all synchronous classes; you are expected to participate actively in the synchronous classes, and may be penalized if you do not participate. You are expected to prepare for each class by completing and thinking about the
primary and secondary readings; I will sometimes email or post study questions that will help to focus our synchronous meetings. In addition, you are expected to complete all coursework, which consists of individual and group assignments, weekly quizzes and emails concerning the readings, a paper or presentation that concerns a comparison between the ancient meaning of the Bible and its modern use, and the final examination, which will focus on the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible. All of these assignments are noted on the document concerning “assessment,” and you will be provided with more details for each assignment.

If you are a student with a documented disability and if you wish to request a reasonable accommodation for this class, or if you have any special needs in relation to this course, please contact me immediately. Please keep in mind that accommodations are not provided retroactively.

All students should purchase *The Jewish Study Bible (JSB)*, eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Brettler. This Bible has maps, annotations, and essays that you are encouraged to use. You might want to read other Bibles as well, but this is the translation we will use in “class,” and you will read several essays from it. Also, purchase Marc Zvi Brettler, *How to Read the Jewish Bible (HtR)*. Other readings will be made available on the “Readings” page of each Unit and in the “Documentation” folder in the course “Tool Box.” In the syllabus that follows, all primary readings (from the Bible and other ancient texts) are marked with an *

**Assessment:**

1. **(15%) Class Preparation (Weekly quizzes and email to instructor):** Completing all of these, every week, with a pass rate of at least 60%, will count for 15% of the grade. Quizzes count for 10% and emails to instructor count for 5%.

2. **Individual and group assignments:** 25% of your grade. (15% for individual assignments; 10% for group assignments.)

3. A **paper or presentation:** a comparison between the ancient meaning of the Bible and its modern use, to be shared by the entire class, is **due at the end of week eleven**, and will comprise 30% of your grade. I will discuss the paper in week seven, and you need to hand in a proposed topic during week eight.
4. **The final examination:** will focus on the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible, namely what the Bible meant in its original contexts, and will comprise 30% of your grade. It will be comprised of two take-home essays and, in a live session, identifications of names, concepts and biblical passages. A description of the final may be found on the “Final Examination Structure” page in Unit 15.

5. **Extra Credit:** For up to five extra points added to your grade, watch four lectures in either [http://members.bib-arch.org/videos/dever/dever.asp](http://members.bib-arch.org/videos/dever/dever.asp) (after the course begins, you will receive instructions to access this website) or [http://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145#sessions](http://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145#sessions).

Write down a total of ten questions you would like to ask the lecturer based on his or her lectures (you must have at least two questions on each lecture) as well as three new things that you learned from each lecture that were not covered in class.

**Additional notes concerning assessment:** You will be penalized 5% for each class beyond one that you miss unless you have proof of a severe medical condition or death in the family. You also need to “meet” with me virtually during the first five weeks of the semester for at least ten minutes, and will be penalized if you fail to do so.

---

**Week 1: Introduction**

**Reading**

Read the following (in this order):


4. Coogan, Michael D. *et al.* “Translation of the Bible into English.” Pages 2197-2201 in
Assignments

1. Readings Quiz
2. Validator: Map of the ancient Near East Part I
3. Validator: Hebrew Bible Chronology Part I
4. Working Group Activity
5. Survey
6. E-mail instructor two questions that you had about the primary or secondary readings, OR two things that you did not understand or found confusing or problematic. No more than two paragraphs, please. (NOTE: You will be responsible for doing this every week.)

Week 2: Creation and Creationism

Reading

Read the following (in this order):


   • Read Introduction, tablet 2: columns 1 and 4, and tablet 5: column 1.


Assignments (for each week, see the LMS for more specific details)
1. Readings Quiz
2. Working Group Activity
3. Survey on the Kitzmiller versus Dover Area School District Case
4. E-mail to instructor

Week 3: Genesis 4–50

Reading
Read the following (in this order):

1. * Genesis 4-50 in The Jewish Study Bible.


5. Reading on rabbinic exegesis of Genesis 22 (Such readings are found on the “Readings” page of each Unit and in the “Documentation” folder in the course Tool Box).
8. Watch Christine Hayes’ Open Yale Course Lecture 5 - Critical Approaches to the Bible: Introduction to Genesis 12-50 (*especially chapters 1 and 2*) [http://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-5](http://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-5)

**Assignments**

1. Readings Quiz
2. Short Form Response and Wall: Rabbinic or Patristic Commentary on Genesis
3. Validator: Map of the ancient Near East Part 2
4. Working Group Activity
5. E-mail to instructor

**Week 4: Exodus**

**Reading**

Read the following (in this order):

2. * Exodus 1-18 in *The Jewish Study Bible*.

- Note: From these pages, you only need to read the prologue, epilogue, along with laws ¶21-25, ¶117-119, ¶190-214, ¶228-232, ¶244-252.

Assignments
1. Readings Quiz
2. Each of the four working groups should watch one-quarter of the 1956 edition of “The Ten Commandments.” You are all encouraged to watch the entire movie, and even its silent 1923 precursor. As you watch the movie, think about how it differs from the biblical account, how it interprets the biblical account, and how it chooses between various sources in the biblical account. Groups should present in L/S.
3. Short Form Response and Wall 1: 2 Assumptions about the 10 Commandments
4. Short Form Response and Wall 2: Post article, artifact, song, or video clip on position of 10 Commandments in contemporary American culture or life.
5. Working Group Activity
6. Survey: 10 Commandments Court Cases
7. E-mail to instructor

Week 5: Biblical Law and Ritual: Priestly and Deuteronomic Perspectives

Reading
Read the following (in this order):
3. * Leviticus 4-5, 12-26 in The Jewish Study Bible.


9. * Deuteronomy 4:44-7:26, 12-26, 28-34 in *The Jewish Study Bible*.


18. Penkower, Jordan S. “The Development of the Masoretic Bible.” Pages 2077-2083 in


20. (Optional) Numbers in The Jewish Study Bible.


Assignments

1. Readings Quiz

2. Short Form Response and Wall: Historical Speech or Item that uses Bible in discussion of slavery in the United States

3. Working Group Activity

4. E-mail to instructor

Week 6: Introduction to Biblical Historical Texts

Reading

Read the following (in this order)


4. Brettler, Marc Zvi. “‘The Walls Came Tumbling Down’: Reading Joshua.” Pages 95-


6. *Judges in The Jewish Study Bible*.


12. *First and Second Samuel in The Jewish Study Bible*.


**Assignments**

1. Readings Quiz

2. Individual Activity

3. Working Group Activity

4. Begin thinking about topic proposal due Week 8 for final paper due Week 11
Week 7: Biblical Historical Texts (continued)

Reading

Read the following (in this order):


2. * 1 Kings in *The Jewish Study Bible*. We will concentrate on chapters 1-14 and 16:17-28.

3. * 2 Kings 1-11, 18-25 in *The Jewish Study Bible*.


7. * 1 and 2 Chronicles in *The Jewish Study Bible* (skim 1 Chronicles 1-9).


12. Cogan, Mordechai. “Sennacherib’s Siege of Jerusalem.” Pages 302-303 in

Assignments
1. Readings Quiz
2. Individual Activity
3. E-mail to instructor

Week 8: Introduction to Prophecy

Reading
Read the following (in this order):
1. * Reread 1 Kings 17 through 2 Kings 13 in the Jewish Study Bible.
5. * Isaiah 1, 40; Jeremiah 1, 25:1-11, 33:1-13; Ezekiel 4; Amos 1-2 in The Jewish Study Bible.
8. *Amos in The Jewish Study Bible.
11. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream.” [Link](http://www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf)

**Assignments**
1. Readings Quiz
2. Individual Activity
3. Working Group Activity
4. Paper proposal due
5. E-mail to instructor

**Week 9: The Prophets (continued)**

**Reading**

Read the following (in this order):


2. *Isaiah 1-6; 11, 13, and 31 in The Jewish Study Bible.*


5. *Jeremiah 1-4, 7, 8, 11, 18, 20, 25, 28, and 31 in The Jewish Study Bible.*


* Please be sure to review and familiarize yourself with key chronological events listed in the LMS.

**Assignments**
1. Readings Quiz
2. Working Group Activity
3. Validator: Hebrew Bible Chronology Part 2
4. E-mail to instructor

Week 10: The Prophets (conclusion): Ezekiel

Reading
Read the following (in this order):
2. *Ezekiel 1-5, 8, 10, 11, 14, 16, 18, 20, 23, 33, 36-39, 40 and 48 in The Jewish Study Bible.
8. *Zechariah, Malachi, and Daniel in The Jewish Study Bible.

Assignments
1. Readings Quiz
2. Working Group Activity
3. E-mail to instructor

**Week 11: Psalms**

**Reading**

Read the following (in this order):


2. *Psalms 1-6, 8, 14, 15, 20, 23, 29, 30, 41, 44, 47, 50, 53, 72, 83, 89, 103, 104, 106, 119 (skim), 121, 122, 137, and 150 in The Jewish Study Bible.*


10. ALSO watch: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcLz2LV8Tfg&feature=youtu.be

**Assignments**

1. Readings Quiz

2. Individual Activity

3. Working Group Activity
4. Final paper/project due
5. E-mail to instructor

**Week 12: Poetry and Wisdom**

**Reading**

Read the following (in this order):


2. *Song of Solomon* (Song of Songs) in *The Jewish Study Bible*.


10. *Qohelet* (Ecclesiastes) in *The Jewish Study Bible*.


**Assignments**

1. Readings Quiz
2. Compare the selections of Proverbs to Qohelet
3. Individual Activity
4. Working Group Activity
5. E-mail to instructor

**Week 13: Job**

**Reading**

Read the following (in this order):


2. *Job in The Jewish Study Bible.*


**Assignments**

1. Readings Quiz
2. Individual Activity
3. Working Group Activity
4. E-mail to instructor

**Week 14: Diversity within the Canon**

**Reading**

Read the following (in this order):


2. *Ruth in The Jewish Study Bible.*

4. *Esther in The Jewish Study Bible.*


**Assignments**

1. Readings Quiz
2. Individual Activity
3. Working Group Activity
4. E-mail to instructor

**Week 15: Review Week**

**No Readings**

**Assignment**

1. Final Exam