



Michelangelo paints the first representation in western art of Elohim's undraped tush.

The Canvas Description of the Course

Thanks for considering Biblical Literacy!

The course is a survey of those portions of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament which are alluded to most frequently in the course of Western Civilization. So you'll read the text of the "Top 40 hits" and you'll then know the context for those biblical allusions. This by itself is fun but even better is an understanding of how these texts came to be and what motivated their authors. This understanding is the result of the work of modern bible scholars who, although mostly devout believers, treated the text as a product of history rather than as a sacred text. James Kugel is explicit about the tension involved for him as an Orthodox Jew. We'll be modern bible scholars.

You already know that the Bible is not a book in the modern sense. It's a collection of texts written during a span of a thousand years and the versions which have come down to us are all the product of editors (fancy word: redactors) who combined previous sources (some of them oral), modified them, and in many cases elaborated them. The earliest texts have been redacted several times and of course it matters when that occurred because the outcome is highly dependent on who's in charge at the moment. For example, the Torah (the initial five books of the Hebrew Bible) was last redacted in the 400s BCE at a time when a group called "the

priestly source" was in control. This text became the focus of Jewish practice in the following centuries as the importance of individual piety and of knowledge of the text grew. It became canonical around 300BCE while the remaining books took on their sacred character during the following 400 years. The latest, Daniel, was written in about 164BCE (stick around for the fascinating story of how we can be so sure!).

The story of the New Testament is equally scrambled. At least two dozen gospels were being circulated around 100CE and the four gospels we know became the most prominent over the next century; Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were not canonized definitively until 382CE. We can easily see that much of Matthew and Luke are taken directly from Mark and that Matthew and Luke have significant amounts copied from another source. Consequently, these three are called the "synoptic" (seen together) gospels. The gospel of John, which was written last, is completely unrelated to the synoptics and contains a very different view of Jesus. The earliest New Testament texts are the letters of Paul but we know that only seven of those in the canon were actually written by Paul and that several of those are composites.

In addition to an account of how the Bible text came to be, modern bible scholars have given us great insights into the intellectual history behind its ideas. (Full disclosure: this is the basis of my enthusiasm for the subject so the course will also be an intellectual journey; I'm not a believer.) We'll be considering the most important aspects of this intellectual history as we go but it will be no spoiler to say that the most significant thing you'll learn is that many "biblical" ideas do not appear in the Hebrew Bible because they were the beliefs of a very late, minority sect of Jews identified by scholars as Jewish Apocalypticists. Jesus was of course a Jewish apocalypticist and he preached to other Jews the ideas that: 1) there was a cosmic force antagonistic to YHWH, 2) that the world was soon (very soon) going to experience what the prophets called "the end of days", a final and determinative cosmic battle in which YHWH would defeat the evil force and usher in the kingdom of God on earth, and 3) that there would be a general resurrection of the bodies of (at least) righteous Jews who would thereafter enjoy eternal life and perhaps of others, who would be doomed to annihilation.

So you should know going in that: the idea of evil did not exist until well after the conversion of Israel from monolatry to monotheism following the Exile; that when the prophets spoke of the end of days they were not referring to a battle (who would be the opponent?) but to the world's reconciliation to YHWH; and that the idea of resurrection of the body first appears in Daniel (c.164BCE) so the idea of an afterlife of just deserts is very late (traditionally, everyone (righteous or wicked) on death descended to Sheol, a dark and unpleasant place where nothing much happened).

So, if learning more about all these matters sounds like a good time, please join us as we increase our Biblical Literacy!

Extra credit: look at two timelines which outline some of the history (hover over an era or idea to see the text):

- 1) [Overview of the Biblical Eras](#)
- 2) [Timeline of the Basic Ideas](#)

By enrolling, you subscribe to our social contract:

1. This study group will be overwhelmingly discussion and every SGM will be expected to contribute to that discussion. In order to make such a contribution, you will need to have read the assigned reading with substantial rigor and perhaps even to have thought about it. So if consistent class preparation would be difficult for you, please decline.

2. There will be designated times during each class for general comments because during class discussions all contributions must relate to the topic or question shown on the slide being displayed.

3. We'll be on Zoom which requires different reflexes than sitting around a table. Unless you are speaking, your microphone should be muted (press your space bar to unmute yourself). You should install the solid black virtual background I will send to you and select it for class meetings. You should ensure that your face is reasonably well lit so we can enjoy your expression as you speak. I will be recording our class meetings so that anyone who cannot join us as scheduled will not be left behind. The same courtesies as in a face-to-face class will be expected: you may not consume food during class; you should be very discrete about drinking beverages; you may not leave your seat except during our break.

4. We'll be using in addition to Canvas another course website which will allow for easy commenting and it will be important for each SGM to contribute to that out-of-class discussion. Please be prepared to spend some time during your preparations to do that.

A note on political correctness.

As modern bible scholars, it's important that we not succumb to microaggressions. We'll therefore always refer to the Hebrew Bible and never to the Old Testament. Likewise, we'll use the era designations BCE (before the common era) and CE (common era) and never refer to BC and AD. We'll refer to Yeshua as Jesus and never as Christ. We'll refer to Israel and Israelites when reference is to the period before the Exile and to Jews (residents of Judea) thereafter even though that's a microaggression towards the Canaanites.

A note about our books.

We are very lucky to have two terrific books to provide a commentary on the biblical texts. James Kugel was for many years at Harvard and taught an undergraduate course on the Hebrew Bible which was so successful that when it had the largest enrollment (larger than the traditional winner, Economics 10), it spawned the classic *Crimson* headline "God beats Mammon". *How to Read the Bible* ([New York Times book review](#)) is the content of that course.

For the past 25 years, Bart Ehrman has been providing popular versions of modern bible scholarship with titles like *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question--Why We Suffer*, *Jesus Interrupted*, and *How Jesus Became God*. He tackled the historical Jesus in *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, an absolutely superb presentation packed with the factual information we need and the closely reasoned argument we'll follow.

As for the biblical texts, *The Jewish Study Bible* is highly recommended for its modern translation (it does not start "In the beginning God created . . .") and terrific annotations. You could also read our Hebrew Bible texts in an edition of the New Revised Standard Version but the annotations, which

come from a Christian perspective, will often be retrojections and therefore misleading (no, the snake is not the Devil; no, the Accuser in Job is not the Devil).

For the New Testament, any NRSV edition will be fine; it's easily found online.

Any questions? Drop me a line at b@ruml.com

Our tentative schedule of topics:

1. Foundations; The Creation Stories; Cain and Abel [[Link to Assignment](#)]
2. The Documentary Hypothesis; The Flood; The Tower of Babel
3. Monotheism; The Patriarchs; The Binding of Isaac; Jacob and Esau
4. Moses and the Exodus; Mount Sinai
5. The Conquest; the Judges; the United Kingdom
6. 722 and 586
7. Return; Job; Daniel
8. Synoptic Gospel Sources; Mark; the Passion
9. Matthew and Luke; the Q Source
10. The M and L Material; Gospel of Thomas
11. Gospel of John
12. Letters of Paul; Revelations