Course description:
In this course, we will examine various aspects of the “culture” of ancient Israel from its origins up to the Babylonian Exile (587 B.C.E.) through a close reading and analysis of large portions of the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament). We will focus in particular on Israelite religion, not just as a set of beliefs and practices, but as a way of understanding gods, humans, the world, and the relations amongst them. Topics will include: myth, ritual, sacrifice, law, and the sacred. Our method will be comparative. Thus, we will also draw upon the mythic and epic traditions of Mesopotamia, Ugarit, and Greece, in order to bring the peculiar nature of the Bible and biblical religion into better focus. Here, we will address the conceptual divide between so-called “pagan” religions and, for lack of a better term, the “monotheistic” religion of ancient Israel. The point isn’t to judge the relative merits of these two different religious systems, but to recognize and understand these differences. Throughout the semester, questions of historical background and literary form (myth, epic, history, and so forth) will also be taken into account. Course requirements have yet to be finalized, but they will include several short response papers, 2 or 3 medium-length essays, and (possibly) a midterm and/or final exam.

Required Texts:
New Oxford Annotated NRSV Bible, 3rd ed
Michael David Coogan, Stories from Ancient Canaan
Stephanie Dalley, Myths from Mesopotamia
Hesiod, Theogony, Works and Days, trans. M. L. West
Homer, The Iliad, trans. Richmond Lattimore
Hershel Shanks, Ancient Israel: A Short History from Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple, rev. ed.