MAP WORLD CULTURES: ANCIENT ISRAEL

FALL 2005 SYLLABUS

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Office hours: I will be in my office before class on Mondays and Wednesdays between 10:15 and 10:45 AM. It is most efficient for me not to have long periods of unscheduled time. I would be happy to see students at other times by appointment, and this is best arranged either after class or by email.

The Course

Ancient Israel is one of those places that almost everyone has heard of, many have grown up studying as kids, but that is in fact a huge mystery. We have two main types of sources. Best known is a single book that was combined by people who considered themselves the heirs to ancient Israel and who were determined to preserve especially its religious traditions. This is of course the Bible, the Tanakh to Jews, the Old Testament to Christians, and usually called the “Hebrew Bible” by scholars. The other source consists of the accumulated finds from archaeological excavations in the land. In general, these do not come with tags that explain what they are or even that they are Israelite. Between the religious compendium with its religious objectives and the mass of nonverbal information, along with the sheer distance in time and place, we understand much less than Israel’s fame might lead you to think.

This course is therefore as much about doubt as it is about knowledge. You cannot know much unless you doubt the quality of what you think you know now. This is not a matter of doubting faith but of doubting assumptions, doubting interpretive frameworks, doubting received wisdom. I want you to start afresh, to come to ancient Israel with fresh eyes, as if you had never really seen it, whatever your starting point.

In order to promote the independent thinking that is the basis for all true learning, I have constructed this course around two complementary bodies of work. First of all, you will gain an idea of basic Israelite history through a principal text. I have chosen this book because it is up-to-date and written for an introductory level class such as this one, not because I agree with the ideas expressed. Lectures will respond to various aspects of this reading with a critical eye. The primary vehicle for encouraging you to think for yourselves, however, is a second body of reading material. For each major segment of the course, I have chosen one piece of evidence for your consideration. A reading packet of scholarly studies that relate to these pieces of evidence will be the basis for in-class conversation and writing projects. The idea in each case is to give you raw evidence for reconstructing Israelite history, so that you can not only formulate your own ideas, but also understand how the process of historical interpretation works.
Course Requirements

A. Reading

This version of my Ancient Israel course represents an attempt to balance the need to communicate basic information with my desire to provoke deeper thought and to build writing skills. To this end, I am using two types of reading material. The first is our text, which will provide the structure for the course, both for lectures and for writing assignments:


We will cover only the first six of the book’s eight chapters, from the patriarchal age defined by the biblical book of Genesis to the end of Israel as an independent people. Notice that the book is not written by Hershel Shanks but is rather a collection of articles by eight different scholars. In this second edition, all of the articles have been revised, five of the six for our course by a different person. When you cite anything in the book, therefore, do not tell me that “Shanks” says such-and-such unless it is in the second chapter on “Israel in Egypt,” revised by him from the original by Nahum Sarna.

The second type of material is the packet of readings on topics related to specific evidence pertaining to ancient Israel. These readings reflect the second focus of study for this class, which encourages independent evaluation of evidence for reconstructing the history and culture of ancient Israel. There is a cluster of readings relating to six different pieces of evidence, one for each chapter that we will cover in the text edited by Shanks. You will need to read this material in order to be prepared for lectures on each piece of evidence and in order to complete three short papers.

The evidence and the readings are the following:

1. A.1146, letter found at Mari (18th century BCE?); from Hammu-ishtamar king of the Yahruru tribe to Yasmah-Addu king of the Yarihu tribe, both from the Binu Yamina (Yaminite) tribal coalition. My translation.


- Kenton Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity*, 109-24 (see Merenptah readings).

4. Iron II Age gate complexes found at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer, should they be attributed to Solomon in the late 10th century or Omri and Ahab in the 9th century?


5. Inscriptions and drawings on large jars found at Kuntillet Ajrud in Israel’s southern desert, pairing Yahweh and the goddess Asherah.


- Bezalel Porten, *Archives from Elephantine* (Berkeley 1968) 278-301.
B. Examinations

There will be two quizzes and no final exam. Each quiz will occupy one class period. Study aids will be provided for factual items, but each quiz will include essays drawn from a combination of the main text and lectures.

The dates of the quizzes will be:

1. Wednesday, October 26
2. Wednesday, December 14

C. Writing Projects

I have assigned three short papers that are calculated to train students in various skills necessary to write a final research paper. These skills include interpretation of primary textual or artifactual evidence, comprehension of technical secondary literature in fields beyond your own knowledge, and dealing with scholarly disagreement over interpretation of primary evidence. In an effort to integrate the readings on individual pieces of evidence into the essential work for the course, I have defined the three short papers by the six topics established for the separate reading packet. These short papers will be graded by each student’s own teaching assistant or by myself, and we will hand them back as quickly as possible. There will be a final research paper that must be chosen from a list of primary evidence.

1. Reading the Bible for History: The Song of Deborah (4-5 pages)
   What can a biblical text tell you about the world of ancient Israel, and what are the barriers? Mine this one text for its insight.
   - due Monday, October 3

2. Technical Debates: Solomon’s Gates and Iron Age Chronology (4-5 pages)
   Archaeological excavations provide a complement to and a potential control on the biblical narrative for the progress of ancient Israel. Many technical problems arise, and even the dates of the finds may not be secure. Enter into one of the most crucial debates.
   - due Wednesday, November 2

3. Nonbiblical Texts and Images: Yahweh and his Asherah at Kuntillet Ajrud (4-5 pages)
   Serendipity sometimes allows archaeology to discover writing, an ancient voice outside of the Bible’s, not necessarily sharing its perspectives, This independence can be most provocative when it involves questions of religion. The words and images from a small site called Kuntillet Ajrud have been especially controversial.
   - due Wednesday, November 23

4. Your Own Research (7-8 pages)
   The three short papers were all based on reading that was provided for you. For the final paper, you need to apply the skills you honed with the short papers to actual research, where you choose what to read and decide what matters. For consistency and focus, I have defined topics based on individual pieces of evidence, as with the previous papers. With my approval, you may choose to write on an item not listed in the instructions for the final paper.
- due Wednesday, December 14, accepted earlier!
- NOTE: Final papers will only be given written comments if students hand them in with
STAMPED, SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPES (WITH ADEQUATE POSTAGE), so that we
 can send them back. Most students never pick up their final papers.

Administrative Details

A. Attendance

Attendance will be taken by the teaching assistants at both general lectures and sections. Results
will pull grades up or down in borderline cases.

B. Grades

Both quizzes and papers will be graded by the teaching assistants for the students in their own
sections. The professor will grade some portion of all papers. Final grades will be based on the
following breakdown.

a. Two quizzes: 30% (15% each)
b. Three short papers: 45% (15% each)
c. Final paper: 25%

Note: Active participation in sections and group lecture discussions will be taken into account,
especially in the case of borderline grades. The teaching assistants and I reserve the possibility
of dropping a grade even beyond borderline cases, if attendance and participation are sufficiently
poor.

**All papers must be handed in AT THE LECTURE, before or after class, on the date due.

Late projects will be penalized by the following system: within one week graded down one fraction
(e.g. A to A-, B+ to B, etc.); one full grade penalty (e.g. A- to B-, etc.), if handed in by the final quiz.
If you anticipate a problem meeting the due dates, please contact your teaching assistant as early as
possible. Once final grades have to be turned in, unfinished work with no negotiated arrangement will
have to be given an F.

C. Help with papers and other advice

I have always devoted a lot of time to advising students, but the classes have been much smaller
than the present one. Students should rely above all on their teaching assistants, especially for hands-on
help with papers and quizzes. I will be glad to help with general problems and questions, as well as
definition of final paper topics, but I will pass on most help with execution to my assistants.

Schedule of Lectures

I. Introduction to the Course
1. September 7, Introduction to the Course
II. The Patriarchal Age: Chapter 1
   2. September 12, Genesis and the Patriarchs
   3. September 14, The Patriarchs in History
   4. September 19, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph
   5. September 21, The Mari Letters and Early Syrian Pastoralism (first evidence-based reading)

III. Israel in Egypt: Chapter 2
   6. September 26, The Shanks Chapter That Should Not Be
   7. September 28, Merenptah (second evidence-based reading)
   8. October 3, Egypt, Exodus, History: FIRST PAPER DUE
   9. October 5, Moses and Sinai

IV. The Settlement in Canaan: Chapter 3
    (October 10, Columbus Day: Holiday, no class)
   10. October 12, The Great Debate Over the Emergence of Israel
   11. October 17, Reconciling Israel’s Many Origins: The Shepherd People
   12. October 19, The Song of Deborah: The Israelite Confederacy (third evidence-based reading)
   13. October 24, Early Israelite Religion
   14. October 26, FIRST QUIZ

V. The United Monarchy: Chapter 4
   15. October 31, An Israelite Empire? David and Solomon
       (fourth evidence-based reading)
   17. November 7, Israel and Judah Unified
   18. November 9, Saul, David, and Solomon as Kings

VI. The Divided Monarchy: Chapter 5
   19. November 14, The World Breaks In
   20. November 16, The Expansion of Writing
       (fifth evidence-based reading)

VII. Exile and Return: Chapter 6
   23. November 28, Judahites in Foreign Parts
   24. November 30, The Persian Restoration
   25. December 5, Elephantine: An Independent View (sixth evidence-based reading)
   26. December 7, Job
   27. December 12, Conclusion
   28. December 14, SECOND QUIZ -- FINAL PAPER DUE
PROJECT NO. 1

READING THE BIBLE FOR HISTORY: THE SONG OF DEBORAH

Objective:

- The three short papers are meant to help students acquire some of the skills necessary to write the final research paper at the end of the term. Much of the important evidence for the ancient world is written, and it is crucial to learn how to sift any ancient text for information. This approach to a text requires an analytical style of reading and response that is dedicated to exploring a world outside your own, known to you only by a voice utterly foreign to yourself. You must be observant of detail, systematic in your gathering of information, sensitive to subtlety, and conscious of big-picture issues in how people live and organize themselves. Good luck! These skills improve with practice.

Background:

Even taken on purely neutral terms, the Bible is the largest, richest written source for the history of ancient Israel. Because the earliest known copies of the Hebrew Bible come from Roman times, already centuries after most of its composition, it is difficult to know how great was the distance between writing and events in any given case. All sorts of questions can be raised about the reliability of the Bible as historical evidence, depending on the text. Aside from the issue of reliability, however, much of the Bible was created with a strong religious motive that shapes the approach and interests of what is written. Even when the primary purpose of a text is not to recount historical events, we can still ask historical questions.

- One of the most important biblical texts for early Israel is the Song of Deborah in the book of Judges, chapter 5. The story of this confrontation during the early period of Israel's life in the land is told in chapter 4. Chapter 5 stands on its own as a poem recounting the call to battle and Israel's victory. Because of its unique voice and its picture of Israel before government by kings, this text is widely regarded as one of the earliest unretouched passages in the Bible, and therefore particularly important for Israelite history. This assignment requires you to work carefully through the Song of Deborah with historical questions in mind, as practice for use of the Bible as a historical source.

The assignment:

Write a 4-5 page paper based on your findings. For preparation, you should read the Deborah articles from the class list, but the project requires independent analysis of Judges 5 from your own reading of that text. As you work, consider the following historical categories to be relevant:

a. Political setting: What groups are defined to act as units? How do they relate to each other? What kinds of leadership are portrayed? Understand how these relate to who is allied and who opposed. Are there any surprises? What strikes you as interesting, from a historical point of view? Can you get any sense of the geography of the region as it relates to the political categories? Picture the political world presented in the poem with as much nuance as possible.

b. Social organization: This one is related to politics, but is not limited to the political. In modern America, one might think in terms of families, neighborhoods, clubs; roles defined by gender, by
age, by place of origin or ethnicity; activities carried out in groups that may not be political. What do you learn about how the people portrayed organize themselves into communities, both at the largest and at smaller levels? Focus especially on the Israelites, though keep all participants in mind. Women play an important role in the poem. Make sure you account for this somehow.

c. Specific events: This text describes a particular sequence of events, although its primary purpose may not be to give an account of these. If Judges 5 were your only source, what could you say about the events of this conflict? Be as observant as you can. Do you have a sense of how the details reflect a perspective that may not be universal? as winners, for one! How secure do you find the details regarding events, given that you have no separate sources? Why?

d. Individual participants: Who exactly does Judges 5 label as individual participants in the events recounted? What details are provided that define who they are and why they are important?

e. Religion: Religion is an important part of this poem. What does this poem tell you about the role of religion in the time and place portrayed? How does religion relate to your conclusions regarding politics and society? Keep in mind that you are reading about the religion of a specific people in a specific setting. Try not to generalize this to “Israel” across all time.

Writing the papers:

**ALL papers must be framed by the following question: How does each of the Song’s three parts contribute to a single coherent purpose? Hymn (vv 2-12); war account (vv 13-23); Yael (vv 24-31).

The Song was not composed as a history text, nor as a news flash. What, then? It is poetry. It is organized a certain way, with certain contents. Think of what the poem tells you about its world, its audience, its point of view, based on your preparation. Can you take a guess at what original use the Song would have served? Can you imagine how it may have been used repeatedly in some way that helped its preservation? What details in the Song of Deborah lend themselves to your explanation? Your conclusions on this central question will affect the way you read the text for historical information.

** ALL papers must present an evaluation of the Song as a source for Israelite history. All three parts of the Song include information with historical value, perhaps in different ways. The discussion of history and the question about form and purpose MUST fit together. This is not arbitrary. They form a necessary pair.

This paper is NOT intended to be a compilation or review of the material in the reading packet. Read it for background. I do not expect you even to make direct reference to that reading, although you have permission to do so, if you find something particularly relevant.

Technical note: When discussing the Song of Deborah or other passages in the book of Judges, you should abbreviate your references as follows. You may speak of “chapter 5” or “verse 3,” but if you are referring to chapter and verse, use the format, Judges 5:3 or Judges 4:23.
PROJECT NO. 2

TECHNICAL DEBATES: SOLOMON’S GATES AND IRON AGE CHRONOLOGY

Objective:

This second project introduces you to a second major category of ancient evidence: archaeological finds other than writing. On one hand, such finds represent a tremendous opportunity to explore the real life of ancient peoples, without the interference of the human voice, which always carries a whole set of assumptions and purposes that may get in the way of modern interpretation. We can see what people really ate, what their homes really looked like, how big their towns really were. We can get a view of their populations, their economies, their religious practices, all simply as they were.

The problem is that non-written archaeological evidence is generally incomplete and by definition comes without labels. In the case of discoveries from modern Israel, Jordan, or Palestine, we cannot even assume that we know the date of a find or its identification with ancient Israelites without a process of reasoning that is often less than secure. In the end, artifacts are like texts: they are indeed facts, but they require interpretation, and interpretation usually leaves room for uncertainty and disagreement.

You need to become familiar with the issues that can arise in debate over such discoveries.

This project will also give you a chance to practice working with secondary literature, the body of writing that represents an ongoing conversation about a given topic or item of primary evidence. In many fields, certainly including study of the ancient world, this conversation involves many technical details that are bound to be unfamiliar to beginning students. At the same time, however, even scholars need to keep the door open to readers who are not trained in all of the particular details of their chosen specialties. Texts are almost always accompanied by translations, and some effort is generally made to explain the problem and situation as a whole. Aside from dictionaries, encyclopedias, and textbooks, most writing on the ancient world is going to include something mystifying at first glance.

When you read secondary literature on a technical subject for this class, force yourself to look for the broad outlines of the argument at the same time as you are plowing through the detail. Recognize the actual structure of the article as you read, including the headings and subheadings. How does the writer define the problem to be discussed? What specific evidence is reviewed in order to argue a specific approach? What prior interpretations does the writer present as a point of departure for his or her own views? Make yourself categorize the method and boundaries of an argument even where you find the details difficult. You may be able to tell that the author evaluates pottery forms from certain excavated levels at certain northern Israelite sites, to propose a certain conclusion in one section of an article.

Once you know that, you can go back over the specific technical details and try to get a sense of exactly what characteristics of this pottery lead to a particular conclusion. Even if you don’t get it all, you will be on the right track.

For the purposes of this course, it is crucial that you adapt to reading technical discussions that include some material that eludes you. If you do not learn to sift through such writing, you will be confined to a narrow range of predigested literature. I want you to recognize and embrace the variety of opinions regarding ancient Israel, so that you can make your own decisions in a well-informed way.
Background:

An enormous portion of the Bible's history of Israel is devoted to what is commonly called the "united monarchy," the first emergence of kings as rulers of all Israel. The books of 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, and 1 Kings 1-11 describe the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, who appear to have ruled through the end of the 11th and most of the 10th centuries, based on the Bible's own chronology. A hundred years ago, these stories could be believed or not, but there was no basis for any independent evaluation. After William F. Albright and others established a relative chronology for ancient Israel based on evolving pottery forms, it was possible to correlate the finds from new excavations with different periods described in the Bible. Saul and David seemed to have produced little in the way of large-scale public works, but there was some evidence that would fit Solomon's dates. Most impressive were the new city gate complexes at Gezer, Hazor, and Megiddo, three major Israelite towns. By these finds, archaeology has long been thought to have confirmed Solomon's wealth and power.

Recently, a number of scholars have questioned this entire scenario. Many biblical scholars have understood the description of Solomon's reign in 1 Kings 1-11 to be centuries younger than the Bible's chronology indicates, and they conclude that the portrayal is unreliable in many respects. Archaeologists led by Israel Finkelstein have proposed a revision of the pottery chronology that has so long been the basis for correlating excavated finds with the biblical accounts. What used to be dated to the 10th century and Solomon has been pushed to the 9th century, when the powerful dynasty of Omri and Ahab would have been capable of major building projects. This leaves Solomon to inhabit a landscape with no archaeological evidence for any great wealth, and biblical scholars may treat the stories as either fanciful legends or extreme exaggerations. I have provided articles from various sides of this debate.

The assignment (4-5 pages):

Choose ONE of the two conversations reflected in your readings for closer evaluation. Discuss in some depth the evidence and arguments at stake EITHER in Finkelstein and Mazar OR in the earlier dialogue involving Knauf, Miller, and Younger. Then, whichever one you choose, evaluate the relevance of the material and arguments for the basic problem of how to characterize the kingdom of Solomon. Did he even exist? If he existed, what archaeological evidence should be attributed to his reign? How should we regard the biblical accounts of his large domain and massive wealth? If you work with the archaeological debate, your comments will be more limited to the general question of how to relate archaeological finds to the biblical portrayal, with history in view.

Be sure both to present a clear rendition of the debate and to offer your own conclusions. For the latter, be as precise and careful as you can. What evidence do you consider to be most secure? If you are going to take refuge in uncertainty, do not be vague about it. Be as precise as possible about what specific issue have not been resolved to your satisfaction, and then about how these affect any reconstruction of Israelite history.

It is important to base your discussion on the actual readings and to show where you are citing ideas or evidence from them. Footnotes should not be necessary for this project, however. Instead, cite author and page inside parentheses; e.g., (Finkelstein, 181). Short quotations may be useful, but avoid long ones, which waste valuable space that is needed for your own analysis.
PROJECT NO. 3
NONBIBLICAL TEXTS AND IMAGES:
YAHWEH AND HIS ASHERAH AT KUNTILLET AJRUD

Objective:

This project is also based on secondary literature that has been provided in the reading packet for the course, and once again, you will have to deal with sharp differences of opinion regarding the evidence in question. This time, however, you will be presented with primary evidence that you can evaluate for yourselves, with the help of these several scholars. The evidence is different from both types you have encountered so far, from the Bible and non-written archaeological finds. You will be dealing with writing that is totally independent from the Bible and yet almost certainly Israelite in some sense, written in Hebrew and invoking Israel’s god Yahweh. The drawings are adjacent to the writing, but their relationship to it is ambiguous.

Background:

The Bible portrays Israel as worshiping one god as its own, a god whose name was spelled with the consonants Yhwh, eventually read by forms of the title “lord.” This devotion to one god is fairly regarded as the most notable trait of Israelite religion in biblical terms. In spite of this ideal, the Bible itself recounts a constant struggle among Israelites over the popular widening of religious practice to include other indigenous deities, male and female. Even in light of the biblical accounts of Israelite polytheism, nothing quite prepares us for what we find at Kuntillet Ajrud, a roadside rest-stop in Israel’s southern desert. A short blessing pairs Yahweh with “his Asherah,” where Asherah is the mother goddess of the region, and her name is given in the Bible to a wooden object used in worship. Is Yahweh married? Only in some circles? The date is about 800 BCE, when Israel was divided into northern and southern kingdoms.

The assignment:

Write a 4-5 page paper that explores the hard evidence from Kuntillet Ajrud. You must account for both the writing and the drawings. Do the drawings depict “Yahweh and his A/asherah,” to match the written blessing? What do you think is meant by the writing? On one hand, you need to come to some conclusion about the combination of evidence as a whole, and what it means for the religion of whoever created it. On the other, you must ask whose religion this represents. What details from the excavated site and its finds help you to be more precise about who is involved. You must not automatically generalize from one artifact to all Israel across time and place, but neither can you arbitrarily isolate this evidence as irrelevant to the larger people.

Your paper may be composed in whatever format best suits the way you think. Along the way, it will be necessary both to discuss the evidence as such and to show familiarity with all of the articles you read. It is probably best to focus on the analytical problems presented by the writing and drawings themselves, rather than to try to review the full contents of each article. Use the same system of citation that I requested for the previous paper.
PROJECT NO. 4

RESEARCH PAPER

Basic definition:

Write a 7-8 page research paper according to the instructions that follow. Provide a bibliography of at least six secondary sources that you have actually cited in the paper. You may use footnotes or endnotes if you prefer, although it may be simplest to follow the citation format requested for the short papers, with author and page in parentheses.

For each of the first three writing assignments, I defined specific boundaries for your preparation that would allow you to focus on the task at hand without having to make your own choices about what to include. With this final paper, I expect the same analytical approach that should have characterized your three shorter projects, but I am adding the requirement that you find the resources by yourself. As with the special topics for each chapter in Shanks, your research papers must be built around some specific item of primary evidence. I will provide a list of topics, but you may choose a focus of your own, with my approval. Think in terms of the main categories of primary evidence: the Bible, non-biblical writing, and non-written archaeological finds, from the small (e.g. female figurines) to the large (e.g. whole towns). You must write on a subject that relates to Israel of the biblical period as defined by the six chapters of Shanks covered for this course.

For any piece of evidence, you will need to begin by defining how it is important for understanding some aspect of ancient Israel, and this importance will provide an objective for your analysis. Does it raise issues of historical events, of culture, of religion? Is there some controversy regarding its interpretation? If it is not from the Bible, what does it allow us to see that was not possible before its discovery?

Beyond this, you will need to study carefully the primary evidence in question, reflecting on its detail so as to provide an anchor for your own conclusions once you begin to read other people’s ideas. Your work will be strongest where it displays original, independent thought, based on your own observation. At the same time, you must gather a body of secondary literature that treats your primary evidence. This will help you both to understand what you’ve got and to see where the uncertainties and the arguments are found.

Undergraduate students are often told to build research papers around some point of controversy. This can be a useful approach, but it will not lend itself to all topics. For one, I find that it can allow too much weight to other people’s opinions and therefore limit your own creative investigation. If you are willing to let yourself get interested in the project, consider the research an exploration of a world that you don’t already know, and be guided by the questions raised by your own initial ignorance. The paper may be organized around the most interesting observations and conclusions from your study, whether or not other scholars have clashed over the raw material. Where there has been controversy, this can provide a ready point of departure, but even then, prior debate can trap you into looking at the evidence the same way everyone else has, when a fresh perspective may be more interesting and productive.
Topics:

*NOTE: You may narrow any one of these topics to some particular focus, without special approval. I have defined these broadly on purpose, with the hope that different students who choose the same general topic will find different perspectives and different secondary literature to suit them.

1. The Babylonian flood story: Genesis begins with background to Israel’s history that includes material related somehow to stories found in ancient Iraq. In particular, tablet XI of the Gilgamesh Epic and the myth of the wise man Atrahasis recount an all-destroying flood that is survived only by a man in a big boat. How do you explain the similarities and differences?

2. Bronze Age archaeology of Canaan: This would be the time of the patriarchs in Canaan. What is the evidence for the land that became Israel during the middle of the second millennium BCE? Where are the cities, the towns, the settlements, and who may have lived there? How do the Genesis ancestor stories fit or not fit the settings suggested by archaeological finds?

3. The childless leader -- Abraham, Keret, and Dan’el: Genesis revolves around the creation of an Israeliite people as an extended family that has survived servant generations in a promised land. God both tests faith and shows his power by making the ancestors wait for the children who will constitute this family. Literature from ancient Ugarit involves the same theme, especially in the tales of Keret (or Kirta) and Aqhat (son of Dan’el). Explore this theme and consider how the wider use affects our understanding of the biblical ancestor stories.

4. The report of Wenamun: Certain Egyptian texts give us a portrait of the land before and just after the emergence of Israel in the land. The report of Wenamun describes the travels of an Egyptian official whose business takes him to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean during the early 11th century, when both Israel and the Philistine coastal kingdoms had surely been established. The perspective is totally different from the Bible’s however. What do we learn from this completely independent view?

5. Akhenaten: It could be argued that the earliest clear worship of one god alone is attested not in earliest Israel but in Egypt, during the reign of the pharaoh Akhenaten. Akhenaten demanded that Egyptians worship only a single god of sunlight, and he even set about destroying competing religious institutions. His religion has provoked intense modern study, especially as it relates to the entire emergence of monotheism.

6. The Ten Commandments and the Covenant Code (Exodus 20-23): The biblical Pentateuch is built around Israel’s reception of Yahweh’s law at Mount Sinai. This law begins with two distinct blocks that have been combined and pocketed in an envelope of encounters between Yahweh and his people at Sinai, described in Exodus 19 and 24. The Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 are traditionally at the core of Mosaic law, and scholars used to consider it the oldest Israelite legal tradition. The so-called Covenant Code in chapters 21-23 resembles law codes from ancient Mesopotamia, and it has also long been considered ancient. Nowadays, many scholars date both of these much later, and must arrive at very different conclusions about how to explain the Mesopotamian similarities.

7. The destructions of an Israeliite conquest -- Jericho, Ai, and Hazor: According to the book of Joshua, the Israelites entered the land at Jericho and its wall fell before them, they burnt the nearby town of Ai, and their northern victories included the burning of Hazor. Jericho and Hazor have been identified with certainty and excavated extensively, with vastly different results. Jericho does not easily fit the biblical account, while Hazor is more cooperative. The site usually identified with Ai is equally uncooperative. What are historians to do with this archaeological evidence?

8. Israelites as Canaanites: W. F. Albright argued that you could distinguish the change from Canaanite to Israeliite occupation of the land by certain recognizable features: the four-roomed house, the
collar-rimmed store jar, and plastered public cisterns among them. More recently, the value of these features has been disputed, and scholars are more inclined to define a continuity between Israelite “material culture” and that of the Canaanites who preceded them. What is the evidence? Does this mean that the Israelites are Canaanites?

9. Israelite judges -- Gideon, Jephthah, or Samson: Choose one of these three main figures from the book of Judges, the one biblical account of Israel's history before the rule of kings. What do the Judges stories tell you about life in early Israel, and about the political and social nature of early Israel? All three come from different parts of Israel and are active in different regions and in different styles.

10. Shiloh: This is one of those names that sounds familiar, but represents an Israelite site that is too easily dismissed as minor. In fact, Shiloh is where the ark of the covenant dwelt before its eventual arrival in Jerusalem, and king David's religious authority somehow had roots in an earlier shrine at Shiloh, somewhat to the north. Shiloh has now been reexcavated, with surprising results. Archaeologists expected a proper town, but no actual homes were found. Shiloh seems to have been a public meeting place without a population, a situation which in fact fits the Bible's portrayal of early Israel quite well. What do we do with these fascinating finds?

11. The “City” of David: Archaeologists have excavated a small section of Jerusalem near the temple mount that appears to be dated to a period that would coincide with the reign of King David, and they have called this “the city of David.” This site would have been a far cry from the massive capital that might be expected for a king of David's reputed power, though in fact a smaller center could fit the biblical description. What does the excavated “city” of David tell us about the role of Jerusalem when it first became the capital of an Israelite kingdom? Note that a new building has been found there in the summer of 2005 that some call a palace. What about it?

12. Bulls and calves in early Israel: Exodus 32 describes Israel’s first great apostasy in terms of a golden calf, and this image came to represent the ultimate alternative to worship of the true God. Bull and calf images were quite common both in ancient Israel and among its neighbors. Several biblical texts mention them, and a number of bull and calf images have been found in and near the Israelite region. Can these be Israelite? Can a bull or a calf represent Israel's god Yahweh?

13. The “house of David” in the Tel Dan inscription: In the early 1990s, two fragments of an Aramaic royal inscription were found at Tel Dan in far northern Israel. The text dates to the late 9th century and mentions “the house of David,” the earliest non-biblical reference to David. A number of scholars immediately challenged the reading of the name “David,” though most accept it. Why is this evidence important? What are the implications for Israelite history? This text provides useful new evidence for the history of the “divided monarchy,” when there were two Israelite kingdoms, north and south.

14. Graves and burial in ancient Israel: One type of archaeological evidence is the tomb, many of which have been found for all times and places within ancient Israel. These preserve handsome artifacts, but in fact they are much more important, for burial of dead family members played a key role in the religious life of all people in the ancient Near East. In some cases, the dead might be considered “divine,” though not necessarily in the same way as named gods of a pantheon. They provided the family's link with the divine world, and for many in Israel's ancient neighborhood, they had to be cared for by symbolic provision that looked just like offerings to deities. What about Israel? Did they have “deified” dead? How did the religious aspect of death and care for the dead affect the idea of worshipping only one god?

15. Israelite and Judahite personal names: Names may seem a commonplace thing, but ancient names often were an expression of worship. “Isaiah” is Yesha-Yahu, “The deliverance of Yahweh”; “Daniel” is “God is my mighty one.” In the debates about whether Israelites actually worshiped one
God alone, personal names can provide essential evidence. Names do not always match individual religious commitments, because popularity may override content, but taken as a whole, they do indicate general cultural patterns for religion. Also, many nonbiblical inscriptions record names even if nothing else, so we have quite a bit of evidence for the period after 800 BCE. What do Israelite names tell us about Israelite religion?

16. The one text from Moab -- a view of Israel from the east: A royal monument in honor of king Mesha of Moab describes Moab's victory over Israel in about 840 BCE. It turns out that the Moabites were a lot like the Israelites, and this text almost sounds like part of the Bible turned inside out, with Israel as the enemy. Explore what Israel looks like from the other side.

17. The letters found at Lachish: Several Hebrew letters were found in the remains of Lachish, the second largest city in the kingdom of Judah at the end of its independent existence. These letters appear to have been sent during the final weeks of Judah's survival, before the Babylonian army swept away the last resistance. They provide a fascinating front-row seat to the conflict, at the same time as they allow us to see the tensions between low-level officials and soldiers under the larger stress of impending defeat. Also, the letters demonstrate a level of literacy that could be surprising in an ancient world dominated by professional scribes. Mine this evidence for information about Judah in its final moments.

18. Female figurines: Dozens of female figurines have been found in Israelite households from various periods. Some of them are often called “pillar figurines,” because the lower part of the body is not fully formed. What were these for? Did they have some religious purpose? Why else would they have been made? Were they particularly for women?

19. The sacred shrine at Arad: In the very southern part of Judah, a town called Arad constituted an important base through the last centuries of that kingdom. Arad was excavated a few decades ago, and a small sacred shrine was discovered, with an altar and two upright stones. The shrine went through more than one stage of use, and its eventual dismantling has been associated with the religious reforms of king Josiah, as described in 2 Kings 23. What are the historical and religious implications of this evidence?

20. Based on the approval of your preceptor, with my confirmation if necessary, you may choose an individual biblical text or set of texts as your primary source. The amount of material must be fairly limited, in order to allow adequate depth. Explore the historical, cultural, or religious implications of the texts you are studying.