WORLD CULTURES: ANCIENT ISRAEL
Autumn 2006, New York University
Prof. Daniel Fleming

SYLLABUS

Teaching staff:
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Office hours to be arranged by preceptors and with the professor by appointment.
Prof. Fleming’s telephone: 212-998-8985; best contact by email. Generally in office before and after class on Mondays and Wednesdays.

The Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies
Shayne Figueroa, secretary: 212-998-8980 (for tracking down Prof. Fleming, if necessary)
53 Washington Square South, first floor (enter at right of elevators, to right from atrium)
Prof. Fleming’s office: room 211, second floor from inside department, to back on left
Prof. Fleming’s mailbox: at foot of staircase, middle of top row

The course

This course is intended to help you learn about a particular people from a faraway place and time, ancient Israel, in a way that allows you to think for yourself. The professor and his talented assistants will not push one supposedly correct interpretation of ancient Israel, and the main work for the class will not be memorization of facts about ancient Israel. There is evidence, and we will do our best to introduce you to it, with a sense of how to grapple with it. There are important debates to which biblical scholars, archaeologists, and historians have contributed, and we will give you an idea of how to listen in and even contribute intelligently without being an expert.

The main work for the class (70%) consists of four writing projects, and we will do everything we can to prepare you as the course progresses to build skills to think and write analytically. To this end, the sections (and their talented preceptors) will be essential. Our goal is to bring you to the point where you can write a final research paper that is original, persuasive, and satisfying, both to yourselves and for us as your readers.

In order to help you achieve greater depth with your final projects, three of the four papers will work from the same broad historical period in Israelite history: before Israel began, early, or later. A few weeks into the semester, and with our assistance, you will choose one of these three periods and make it your specialty for the term. We want you to be scholars, not just students. This should be liberating for you, freeing you to come to your own conclusions, and it will be much more exciting for us, as we read your work.
Materials

1. One text for crucial orientation, a series of chapters edited by Hershel Shanks: *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1999). There will be no reading packet. Further reading for specific projects will be put on reserve, as needed. These are available through the NYU book center.

2. A Bible. Ancient Israel is the topic of the Jewish Tanakh, which contains the same books as the Christian Old Testament, in different order. The following translations are recommended, although you may ask about others. Beware the popular recent paraphrases, which for this course drift too far from the wording of the ancient text. You should buy this on your own, depending on what style best suits you.

   The Jewish Publication Society Tanakh: a recent translation by Jewish scholars, consciously avoiding the longstanding Christian King James language.

   The Revised Standard Version (RSV), now found in “new” forms, and given special publishers’ names like “The Oxford Bible” and the like. Check the front pages or forward before you buy. This is a Christian translation that consciously embraces the King James tradition, while updating it for precision and style.

   The New International Version: the first Christian translation to attempt a completely new wording; simple and clear, without paraphrasing.

Requirements (with grade percentage)

All written work must be submitted in hard copy, with 12-point print and standard margins. Papers will be handed in during class. If you cannot do so, you may make explicit arrangements either to give it to your preceptor or to the professor before the end of the work day at their convenience.

Blue books will be provided for the final quiz. You should come to class with lined paper on which you can write responses to occasional exercises integrated into the lecture time.

The three short papers will be handed back as soon as possible after their completion, either in class or in section, and the grader will write careful comments on each one. Students who wish to receive written comments on their final papers must hand them in with a self-addressed and stamped envelope of size and postage adequate to the contents.

1. Engagement with sections and lecture meetings (15%)

Sections meet once a week and are designed by the individual preceptors, in consultation with the professor. Their primary goal is to prepare you to succeed with the graded work for the term, especially the four writing projects. At the same time, they will contribute to your sense of how the course functions as a whole. Without taking part, you are liable to be lost and likely to be disconnected. The preceptors will ask you to get ready for section meetings in various ways,
always with your training in mind. They will record your attendance and participation, not for your gift of gab so much as for your serious attempt to learn, however vocally or quietly.

Regular lecture meetings will also include ad hoc in-class activities, which may sometimes involve writing. These may be collected, simply to record that students took part. Attendance will be taken sporadically.

Together, all of these will contribute to a single grade that will be assigned by your preceptor, which will count for 15% of your final grade.

2. Final quiz (15%) -- Wednesday, December 13th

There will be one quiz at the end of the semester, during the final regular class meeting. It will be based on a combination of basic factual information, for which you will be provided a study sheet, and comprehension of lecture content. This quiz will help ensure a sense of continuity to the whole course, so that you take time to keep track of the main flow of material, even as you focus your greatest efforts on the papers.

3. First paper: the Sennacherib project (15%) -- due Wednesday, October 4th

The most important basis for any understanding of ancient Israel is the “primary evidence,” actual material from the ancient world. This may come to us either as writing or as other artifacts. The Bible provides a central example. Usually, we are forced to read the Bible without much comparative evidence, and certainly without hearing someone else’s side of the story. History allows us one magnificent exception: the invasion of Judah by the Assyrian king Sennacherib. Here, we have multiple versions both of the biblical account and of the Assyrian royal annals that cover the same event. You will grapple with both together, in order to come to some sense of what actually happened. For this project, we want you to work on the primary evidence without any recourse to what other modern interpreters think, in the “secondary literature.”

4. Second paper: review of histories (15%) -- due Wednesday, October 25th

With this second paper, you will choose an epoch of Israel’s story as a focus for the rest of the semester. We will cover six chapters in the text edited by Shanks, and you will have three choices for a primary focus:

a. Israel’s background: chapters 1 and 2, “The Patriarchal Age” and “Israel in Egypt”
b. Early Israel: chapters 3 and 4, “The Settlement in Canaan” and “The United Monarchy”
c. Israel and Judah: chapters 5 and 6, “The Divided Monarchy” and “Exile and Return”

YOU WILL HAVE TO WORK ON THE SAME PERIOD FOR THIS AND THE FOLLOWING TWO PROJECTS, SO THINK ABOUT WHAT SEEMS MOST ATTRACTIVE FOR ALL THREE.
There are two goals for this paper: first, to make you familiar with at least one controversy that relates to the period you choose to study; and second, to help you get used to reading and responding to "secondary literature" that was not written for students without background. Multiple copies of five important histories that treat ancient Israel will be placed on reserve, and you will compare and evaluate how a subset of these treat particular issues that will be defined for you in advance.

5. Third paper: practice research (15%) -- due Wednesday, November 15th

The third paper combines primary evidence with secondary literature as practice for writing your final research projects. In this case, the topics are chosen for you, with both the evidence and some scholarly interpretation of it provided for you. This way, you will not have to find your own sources and make your own decisions about what is most relevant and important for the problem in question. You will, however, need to give greatest weight to the evidence itself, as in the first paper, while you enter the fray with scholars who know much more than you do but who nevertheless can’t seem to agree on how to understand this evidence. Your research papers will require the same combination.

YOU MUST CHOOSE THE TOPIC THAT MATCHES THE PERIOD YOU MADE THE FOCUS OF YOUR HISTORY REVIEW.

a. Israel defeated by Egypt's Pharaoh: the Merenptah Stele (ca. 1207 BCE)
b. A portrait of early Israel?: the Song of Deborah (Judges 5)
c. "Yahweh and his Asherah"?: the writing and images from Kuntillet Ajrud (ca. 800 BCE)

6. Final research paper (25%) -- due Wednesday, December 13th

This research paper is meant to be the culmination of everything you have learned how to do through the course. By this time, we hope that you will have become particularly familiar with the issues related to one of the main epochs of Israel’s story, and this familiarity will help you achieve more depth in your discussion of the problems involved with a specific topic. Every project must be defined by specific primary evidence that relates to one of the epochs in question. Suggested topics will be provided in a future handout, but you may choose your own, WITH THE PROFESSOR’S APPROVAL. For the research papers, you will have to find and evaluate your own secondary sources, which will not be on reserve. Two of the section meetings will be devoted to training in use of the library and its resources, which will be generously led by Evelyn Ehrlich, Head of the Humanities and Social Sciences Center at the Bobst Library (evelyn.ehrlich@nyu.edu).

Administration

Grading for this course will be shared by the professor and his talented assistants. Students will be graded on a regular basis by their preceptors, but I will take at least an equal share of each assignment and try to grade each student’s work at least once during the semester. The four teaching staff will meet to compare grades in each case, so that we come as close as possible to matching evaluations. Professor Fleming takes final responsibility for every grade, within the
following structure. If you believe that your grade is in error or not fair, please approach first the person who graded the work, for review. If you are still not satisfied after your preceptor reconsiders a grade, you may submit it to the professor, whose judgment is final. I have a bias toward supporting the careful decisions of my assistants.

Late papers will be graded down on the following basis:

- late up to and including one week: one grade fraction (B to B-, B- to C+, etc.)
- late more than one week, through the end of the term: one full grade (B to C, B- to C-, etc.)

IF YOU HAVE ANY PROBLEM WITH MEETING DEADLINES, INFORM YOUR PRECEPTOR OR THE PROFESSOR AS SOON AS YOU ARE AWARE OF IT. It is always possible to consider special circumstances, to be judged on an individual basis. Again, the professor takes final responsibility for deciding how to handle individual requests about problems.

Special note: additional assistance in the form of free tutoring is available outside the class itself from the College Learning Center, on the first floor of Weinstein Hall, behind Java City. The web site is http://www.nyu.edu/cas/clc, and the contact is Kimberly Yousey.

Tentative calendar of class sessions

September 6, Ancient Israel first hand

September 11, Thinking in sixes (I): The Hershel Shanks version of Israel’s history in six chapters

September 13, How does the Bible know anything about ancient Israel?

September 18, How do we ourselves know anything about ancient Israel?

September 20, Thinking in sixes (II): It’s not all settled.

September 25, Israel and Judah: Me and my big idea

September 27, Genesis basics: The framework for a “patriarchal age”

October 2, Yom Kippur -- NO CLASS

October 4, The ancestors in history -- FIRST PAPER DUE

October 9, Columbus Day -- NO CLASS

October 11, Thinking in sixes (III): The One True Religion
October 16, Dueling tribal sheikhs (a letter from ancient Mari)

October 18, Egypt basics: Bible content, New Kingdom Egypt, and archaeology

October 23, Where does the Egypt tradition come from?

October 25, Joshua, Judges, and how Israel began -- SECOND PAPER DUE

October 30, Israel “from” Syria, Egypt, and Jordan: the traditions of a shepherd people

November 1, Early Israelite religion: Canaan’s gods and Yahweh

November 6, Snapshots of early Israel: Stories from the book of Judges

November 8, Monarchy basics: Saul, David, and Solomon

November 13, Judah: Was it originally part of Israel?

November 15, The Great Debate over 10th-century archaeology -- THIRD PAPER DUE

November 20, Two-kingdom basics: North and south from Judah’s side

November 22, The world breaks in: The impact of Assyria’s invasion

November 27, The 8th century and the writing explosion

November 29, The age of Bible formation

December 4, Exile basics: A new world order

December 6, The Persian restoration: Does the Bible have a happy ending?

December 11, Job: One view from a broken world

December 13, FINAL IN-CLASS QUIZ -- FINAL PAPER DUE