Nothing but the Facts

I have taught Ancient Israel at NYU since 1999, usually once a year. Somehow, it is impossible for me to remain satisfied with the same approach for more than two or three years, though I keep hoping. Last year I started afresh once again, defining the whole project from scratch, and the results were exciting. Maybe this time I have something that will last.

A while back I heard another of those commentaries about the sad state of American education, in this case college education. Look at how little students know, they said: the Bill of Rights, the crucial presidents, basic names from classic literature. Shocking, they said, shocking! It occurred to me that it was ridiculous to measure college education by lists of facts that we were supposed to learn in high school or before. University studies are about more than learning lists of facts – and indeed they are.

Then I found myself talking with a colleague about teaching big introductory courses and was casting about for something fresh and fun and it suddenly occurred to me: What if I did build my Ancient Israel course around a list of facts, but I pushed myself to come up with my own most important facts on my own terms, not as names and dates but as essential perspectives and conclusions?

This course is the result of my effort to compose such a list and to try it out as a way to introduce ancient Israel. Every class session will revolve around one “fact,” as defined by your professor, anchored to both primary evidence and secondary readings that relate. There will be daily preparations that will lay the groundwork for discussion of each of my declarations, and the two in-class exams will be structured around them as well.

No textbook has been written to suit either this format or my particular ideas, so the readings have been assembled piecemeal, according to each topic. I want you all to be equipped with the same annotated Bible translation and with a fairly simple Bible “atlas” as regular references, though much of the evidence for the course reaches outside the Bible and the Bible is never a simple authority for history. As you will see, the course will begin with large framing considerations and then will move in the second half to what may be called “history from below,” or more technically, “social history,” focused on everyday life and experience, ending with religion.

Graded work:

General note: Just as I have revised the entire definition of this course, I have also shifted the grading from past practice. I have always valued writing more than demonstration of knowledge by examination, and I have assigned three papers, with the first two as preparation for a final
research paper. Now I am assigning only two papers, with 30% of the grade devoted instead to
daily one-page writing assignments as preparation for class. These will be graded quickly on a
scale of 1-10, to be multiplied as if by ten (9.5 = 95, etc.), and they are essential for the success
of our class meetings. Daily preparations will vary widely, with some focused on problem-
solving and some more creative or speculative; they will not be drab reports on the reading.
Please take them extremely seriously, as we shall.

1. Breakdown of grading:
   a. Daily projects and class engagement (30%): The definitions for these will be provided in a
      separate document.
   b. Two in-class exams (one hour and fifteen minutes each) (15% each): Each exam will be
      framed by the 26 “facts” that define the shape of the course.
   c. Two six-page papers (20% each)

2. The two papers:
   Instructions for each paper will be posted on NYU Classes well in advance of each
assignment. Here are brief descriptions:
   a. Paper no. 1 (6 PAGES) – DUE WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 4: The first paper is
      intended to develop skill in careful reading and analysis of primary evidence, the raw
      material for any knowledge or comprehension. In this case the texts will include a
      passage from the Bible recounting a major war with Moab, Israel’s neighbor to the east,
      and an inscription reflecting the very same conflict from a king of Moab boasting of
      victory over Israel. These two different views on the same events will offer an occasion
      to approach evidence for Israel with both a critical and a sympathetic eye, trying to get
      into their minds and understand their purposes, as well as to get a sense of the past
      through contrasting sources.
   b. Paper no. 2 (6 PAGES) – DUE WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 2. This second paper is
      intended to send you into the “secondary literature,” what others have written on a given
      topic. Unlike the first paper, this one will allow a range of potential topics, each picking
      up from some element of the secondary literature associated with preparation for the
      individual “facts” of each class session.

Reading:
Only two texts have been ordered for the course: the Jewish Study Bible from the Jewish
Publication Society, so all will have the same translation for work with the Bible; and the Oxford
Bible Atlas for reference to places in Israel. This atlas may be used more often in sections than in
the main class meetings, but it will be important for knowing where you are and for having a
basic grasp of the lay of the land for each main period.

Administration:
Teaching staff:
   Daniel Fleming, Edelman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, df2@nyu.edu
   Rachel Angel, doctoral student in Hebrew Bible, section instructor, ra1076@nyu.edu
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   Office hours for the professor: Monday 1:00 – 2:00 PM and Wednesday 10:00 – 11:00 AM.
Office hours for section instructors as set individually.
Prof. Fleming’s telephone is 212-998-8985, but the most reliable way to make rapid contact is by email.

The Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies
Ryan Grubbs, administrative assistant, 212-998-8980
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, behind staircase on first floor, middle of top row (for turning in late papers)

Policies:
Grading for this course will be shared by the professor and the section instructors. Students will be graded on a regular basis by their section instructors, 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 three teaching staff will meet to compare grades in each case, so that we come as close as possible to matching evaluations. I take 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 section instructor reconsiders a grade, you may submit it to the professor, whose judgment is final. I have a bias toward supporting the careful decisions of the instructors.

Late papers will be graded down as follows. Up to and including one week, one grade fraction (e.g. B to B-); more than one week, through the end of the term, one full grade (e.g. B to C). IF YOU HAVE ANY PROBLEM MEETING DEADLINES, INFORM YOUR SECTION INSTRUCTOR 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.

Class sessions: 24 Facts about Ancient Israel

Part I: Framing Ancient Israel
A. Definitions
1. (September 2) When I talk about ancient Israel I mean the people of Yahweh in the Bible.
   Evidence: the Ketef Hinnom inscription (see “Ketef Hinnom” under Wikipedia – authorized for this use!)
2. (September 9) An ancient Israel course is not a Bible course: keep your Bible handy but get ready to take on more historical baggage.
   Evidence: Judges 17-18
   Reading:

3. (September 14 – Rosh Hashanah) Ever heard of Moab? Israel was another not-so-splashy Middle Eastern people unique like you are to your mother.
Evidence: the Mesha Inscription from ancient Moab (*Context of Scripture* vol.2)
Reading:

4. (September 16) We can only understand them because they were people like us, and we will only begin to understand them by recognizing just how different their world was from ours.
Evidence: Psalm 82 (my translation)

B. History
5. (September 21) “History” is life in the past, not just great events or people.
Evidence: Inheritance by a “prostitute” from 13th-century BCE Syria (Emar VI.3 31)
Reading:

6. (September 23 – Yom Kippur) In the end, Israel was only one of two sister kingdoms, with the other called Judah, but in the Bible, Judah is the one that gets to tell Israel’s story.
Evidence: 1 Kings 12:1-24
Reading:

7. (September 28) Be careful of explaining a thing by how it began – yet the Bible loves this: think of Moses, Joshua, and David.
Reading:


8. (September 30) Archaeology is the anchor for exploration of ancient Israel, though without names and storyline.

Reading:
- William Dever, “Retrospects and Prospects in Biblical and Syro-Palestinian Archaeology,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 45 (1982) 103-7 (available through JSTOR; can be found through *Near Eastern Archaeologist*, its new name).

9. (October 5) While history is often known by famous events and leaders, history “from below” asks about everyday life and may give a richer sense of ancient Israel.

Reading:

C. The Politics of Israel
10. (October 7) “Israel” never took its identity from a great city, unlike Babylon, Athens, or Rome, and it was never easy to control from a central place.
Evidence: the Merenptah Stele; the Kurkh Monolith of Shalmaneser III king of Assyria (from Mordechai Cogan, *The Raging Torrent* [Jerusalem 2008])

Reading:

(October 12: Fall recess, no class)

11. (October 13 – TUESDAY!) In ancient life and ancient Israel you never leave your family – never – and where you are buried tells the story of who you are.


Reading:

12. (October 14) When you understand Jerusalem, you can grasp all the big pieces of Israel’s political life, both by where it appears and where it does not.
   Evidence: Judges 5; 2 Samuel 5; 1 Kings 22; Isaiah 6
   Reading:

13. (October 19) A woman could be in politics, but better a mother than a queen.
   Evidence: Judges 5; 2 Kings 11
   Reading:
   - Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen* (New York 1998), Chapter 1, “Deborah, Women, and War,” pages to be selected.
   - Reading on Athaliah.

**October 21: First in-class exam**

Part II: History from Below: Real life Israel

D. Staying Alive

14. (October 26) Life could be cut off without warning, so it is better to see it as an obstacle course than as “lifespan.”
   Evidence: Genesis 35:16-21; Ecclesiastes/Qohelet 3
   Reading:

15. (October 28) Most people did not travel, and stable life meant a stable home. Violence was the violation of that home from outside or from within.
   Evidence: Genesis 34; 2 Samuel 13;
   Reading:
   - Yael Shemesh, “Rape is Rape is Rape: The Story of Dinah and Shechem (Genesis 34),” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 119 (2007) 2-21 (available through NYU library).
   - Jack Sasson, *From the Mari Archives: An Archival Mosaic of an Old Babylonian Culture* (Winona Lake, Ind. 2015, advance copy with appreciation to the author), Chapter 3, “War.”

16. (November 2) The ingredients of an arranged marriage tell us everything we need to know about the bounds of everyday life, where the family is the essential structure.
Evidence: the marriage contract in the Kathleen Abraham article; the book of Ruth

Reading:

Sasson, From the Mari Archives, Chapter 1.8, “Marriage of Mari Princesses.”

17. (November 4 – SECOND PAPER DUE) Forget about careers: think about income in terms of farming and flocks.
Evidence: Gezer calendar (see King and Stager, p.88)
Reading:
Oded Borowski, Agriculture in Iron Age Israel (Winona Lake, Ind. 1987), Chapter 4 section on the Gezer text.

E. Life Experience

18. (November 9) The IT Department: whether in the Bible or in ancient copies, writing was information technology mastered mainly by specialists, few people knew how to read, and you have to approach it with professional scribes in view.
Reading:

19. (November 11) Entertainment without the internet: what did you do for a good time? Think festivals, drama, and a good story.
Evidence: Esther; a Hittite ritual text (KUB XVII 35 Column III)
Reading:
Charles Carter, “Hittite Cult-Inventories,” University of Chicago Ph.D. 1962, 142-44.

20. (November 16) You are what you eat: whole patterns of life are revealed by the difference between boiling and roasting, and sweetness sums up everything “good” in life.
Evidence:
Reading:
21. (November 18) They were human like us, but our most basic experiences are interpreted through socially conditioned expectations, and these are different for different peoples and times: consider the emotions of love, hate, and anger.
   Evidence: (biblical text on human anger); a letter from Mari (A.1146)
   Reading:

F. The Powers Beyond
22. (November 23) Worship of a single God comes from polytheism, where the powers beyond us are persons and we live in a community combining gods and humans: most assumptions of polytheism remain part of the Bible’s monotheism.
   Evidence: Deuteronomy 32:8-9 (and the whole poem); Prayer to Any God (Foster, *Before the Muses* [Bethesda, Md. 1996] 2.670-72).
   Reading:

November 25, Thanksgiving break – NO CLASS
23. (November 30) When you meet a god, he (or she) could take the form of an animal, a monster, or even a human, all to communicate something you need to know – and God as well.
   Evidence: Genesis 18:1-15; the temple at Ain Dara (look at Google images under “Ain Dara”)
   Reading:

24. (December 2 – SECOND PAPER DUE) The God of Israel has a history that puts him among the gods of polytheism.
   Evidence: Exodus 15; Judges 5; Habakkuk 3
   Reading:

25. (December 7) There were no doctors and no therapy; we have to imagine the treatment of physical and mental illness in terms of religion and the encounter with powers beyond ourselves.
   Evidence: 1 Samuel 1
   Reading:

26. (December 9) They suffered too, and you can feel it in their poetry.
Evidence: Job (the whole book)
Reading: to be provided, as necessary

December 14 (second in-class exam)