Nothing but the Facts

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: Recently I have shifted my grading pattern to incorporate regular written work in the form of daily one-page (minimum) assignments as preparation for class, worth 30% of the grade. 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 each preparatory exercise will be provided at the end of the previous class. NOTE: These preparations will only be accepted on the day they are due. Any accumulation of undone assignments will have a serious adverse effect on total grades. THE PRINTED COPY MUST BE HANDED IN DURING CLASS.
   b. Two in-class exams (one hour and fifteen minutes each) (15% each): Each exam will be framed by the 25 “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 MONDAY, OCTOBER 2: 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 body of biblical writing from the books of Samuel in the Bible and from the Gilgamesh Epic of ancient Babylonia that present intimate male friendships between heroes: David and Jonathan on one hand, and Gilgamesh and Enkidu on the other. These relationships have been called sexual (and so homosexual) by some, and their intensity and sexual overtones require careful consideration.
   b. Paper no. 2 (6 PAGES) – DUE WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6. 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
Jaime Myers, doctoral student in Hebrew Bible, section instructor, jam1365@nyu.edu
Jonathan Schmidt-Swartz, doctoral student in Hebrew Bible, section instructor, schmidtswartz@nyu.edu
Office hours for the professor: Monday and Wednesday 1:00 – 2:00 PM.
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
Yarmine Fernandez, administrative assistant, 212-998-8980
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: 25 Facts about Ancient Israel

PART I: FRAMING ANCIENT ISRAEL

A. DEFINITIONS

1. (September 6) Defining Israel
   Evidence: the Ketef Hinnom inscription (see “Ketef Hinnom” under Wikipedia – authorized for this use!)
   Reading:

2. (September 11) The role of the Bible
   Evidence: 2 Kings 18-19
   Reading:

3. (September 13) The question of uniqueness
   Evidence: the Mesha Inscription from ancient Moab (Context of Scripture vol.2)
   Reading:

4. (September 18) Foreignness to us
Evidence:
Psalm 82 (my translation)

B. HISTORY
5. (September 20) Defining history
Evidence: Inheritance by a “prostitute” from 13th-century BCE Syria (Emar VI.3 31)
Reading:
Geoff Eley, A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society (Ann Arbor 2005), “Preface,” ix-xiv; “Becoming a Historian: A Personal Preface,” 1-12 (NYU online version); read more if you like!

6. (September 25) Israel and Judah
Evidence: 1 Kings 12:1-24
Reading:

7. (September 27) Bible beginnings and Egypt
Reading:
8. (October 2) The role of archaeology: **FIRST PAPER DUE**
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 Archaeology*, its new name).

9. (October 4) History from below
Reading:

(October 9, Fall Recess – no class)

C. THE POLITICS OF ISRAEL
10. (October 11) Israel politically
Evidence: the Merenptah Stele; the Kurkh Monolith of Shalmaneser III king of Assyria (from Mordechai Cogan, *The Raging Torrent* [Jerusalem 2008])
Reading:

11. (October 16) Ancestors and burial
Reading:

12. (October 18) Jerusalem
Evidence: Judges 5; 2 Samuel 5; 1 Kings 22; Isaiah 6
Reading:

13. (October 23) Politics and women
   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 25: First in-class exam

PART II: HISTORY FROM BELOW: REAL LIFE ISRAEL

D. STAYING ALIVE
14. (October 30) Length of life
   Evidence: Genesis 35:16-21; Ecclesiastes/Qohelet 3
   Reading:

15. (November 1) Violence
   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 (forthcoming, with appreciation to the author), Chapter 3, “War.”

16. (November 6) Marriage
   Evidence: the marriage contract in the Kathleen Abraham article; the book of Ruth
   Reading:
17. (November 8) Making a living
   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 13) Writing
   Evidence: Three “school dialogues,” translated by Herman Vanstiphout, in William Hallo
   Reading:
       Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge,

19. (November 15) Entertainment
   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.
       Takeshi Inomata, “Plazas, Performers, and Spectators: Political Theaters of the Classic
       Maya,” *Current Anthropology* 47 (2006) 805-42 (including responses and discussion;
       available through NYU library).

20. (November 20) Eating
   Evidence: See Magness
   Reading:
       Jodi Magness, “Conspicuous Consumption: Dining on Meat in the Ancient
       Mediterranean World and Near East,” in Peter Altmann and Janling Fu eds., *Feasting
       in the Archaeology and Texts of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (Winona
       Lake, Ind. Forthcoming), with appreciation for advance copy from the author.
       West* (Oxford 2010), section on boiling and roasting.

(Wednesday, November 22, day before Thanksgiving: NYU recess, no class)

21. (November 27) Emotion
   Evidence: (biblical text on human anger); a letter from Mari (A.1146)
   Reading:
       Deena Grant on anger

F. The Powers Beyond

22. (November 29) Monotheism and Polytheism
   Evidence: Deuteronomy 32:8-9 (and the whole poem); Prayer to Any God (Foster, Before the Muses [Bethesda, Md. 1996] 2.670-72).
   Reading:

23. (December 4) Yahweh
   Evidence: Judges 5 (The Song of Deborah); the geographical lists of pharaohs Amenhotep III and Ramesses II (to be provided with NYU Classes)
   Reading:

24. (December 6) Forms of the divine: SECOND PAPER DUE
   Evidence: Genesis 18:1-15; the temple at Ain Dara (look at Google images under “Ain Dara”)
   Reading:

25. (December 11) Sickness and healing
   Evidence: 1 Samuel 1
   Reading:

December 13: second in-class exam