

Ancient Israel

New York University, Autumn 2021
Professor Daniel Fleming

Syllabus

Teaching staff:

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Office hours for the professor: Monday and Wednesday (1:00 – 2:00 PM, Mondays and Wednesdays – if feasible with Covid)

Office hours for section instructors as set individually.

Please make all contact with Prof. Fleming by email, which he will answer as quickly as possible.

The Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies

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53 Washington Square South, first floor (enter at right of elevators, to right from atrium)

Prof. Fleming's office, room 204, second floor from inside department, front right

Prof. Fleming's mailbox, at foot of staircase, middle of top row (for turning in late papers)

Welcome!

As of late August, NYU is still planning on face-to-face classes, and perhaps like you, I am equally excited at the prospect and nervous that Covid will blow it all up. Welcome all the same.

With the uncertainty surrounding the coming semester, I have chosen to organize the course so as to take advantage of a moment ten years ago, in 2011, when the university recorded my Ancient Israel class sessions and posted them on YouTube, where they still can be found. These recordings will only become part of the 2021 course if we are forced to go remote, in which case I will reorganize our routine in a way that incorporates them.

The great interest for me in choosing this approach is the opportunity to reflect on how my thinking has changed across ten years, as well as to revisit an earlier method for teaching Ancient Israel. The course will be one-time only, with every class session redone afresh in dialogue with my older version.

The Subject:

You may think you know ancient Israel quite well, or you may be sure you know nothing. In either case, this course is designed to make the acquaintance from scratch. My ancient Israel is strange, sometimes shocking, diverse, and mostly hidden. It can be approached from archaeology and non-biblical writing as well as from the Bible as its most famous artifact. I am a biblical

scholar and student of ancient literature, so this class will lean toward what is written. When it comes to ancient Israel, the Bible offers our *only* narrative. This can be something to shake off, to disprove or discount, and yet the stories are powerful and persistent. For this course, as I did in 2011, I will embrace the Bible as point of reference, and a recurring question will be how to gain the most from this approach, eyes open to the pitfalls.

In a broadly chronological framework, we will ask what I hope to be unfamiliar questions, trying to get you to see things you had not considered before. The course assumes no prior knowledge, and all knowledge is built from the ground up based on “primary evidence,” the actual material from the ancient world – including the Bible. Every full-class meeting will involve conversation in response to some piece of primary evidence, with expectation that you have as much right as any scholar to figure out who these people are for yourself. I will look forward to seeing what you come up with, both in class meetings and in your papers.

The Goal:

I do not expect study of Israel, the Bible, or the ancient world to be part of your career plans. Nevertheless, I intend the course to contribute directly to your university education. The two in-class exams are designed to help you keep your bearings, and they are not the focus of the coursework. My goal is to help you learn to reason critically and write analytically: to evaluate evidence for yourself, to identify problems of interest; to construct innovative and convincing interpretations; and to persuade readers of their plausibility. All the work for the course is designed to serve this goal.

Full-class meetings and sections:

The NYU Core program is built around the combination of large sessions with the professor and smaller “sections” with a “preceptor,” usually an advanced doctoral student with considerable experience in the field. Over time, I have moved ever further from considering my role to be built around “lectures,” which are generally less useful to today’s students than more interactive experiences. Therefore I have labeled the large sessions “full-class meetings,” which will be the primary venue for setting the agenda of the course: defining an approach to studying ancient Israel; establishing a method with reliance on primary evidence; doing everything I can to ignite an interest in the material. Section meetings are equally crucial to successful completion of the course. There, you will be able to work more personally with an instructor who can make sure you are comfortable with the basics and who can help you develop skills for the writing projects that carry the main weight of learning for the course.

Graded assignments:

I consider every fraction of the 100% available to grade this course a precious commodity, a way for you, and then us, to measure what you are accomplishing in pursuit of its priorities. Participation is essential, but the direct grades will all belong to three categories of work:

- a. Daily projects and class engagement (30%);
- b. Two in-class exams (one hour and fifteen minutes each) (15% each);

c. Two six-page papers (20% each).

The exams represent a basic tracking of the material for the course, defined above all by what transpires in the full class meetings. You must learn to take good notes – and when to take them. Each meeting will include considerable conversation, and I will flag the particular sections that demand notation for later recollection. The two papers are designed to cultivate essential skills in developing your own ideas and making a case for them, based on evidence and logic. More information on these will be provided separately.

Daily preparations:

The more unusual grading element is the 30% devoted to daily writing assignments as preparation for class. NOTE THE FOLLOWING:

- I will give each assignment at the end of one class, to prepare for the next. I want the receiving of these to be part of your physical presence in class.
- On the day they are due, before class, daily preparations must be submitted through the “Assignments” heading in Brightspace. This system is new to me, and I have not previously tried to do this grading digitally. Please be patient with us!
- Preparations will be graded quickly on a scale of 1-10, to be multiplied as if by ten (8.5 = 85, a B; 9.5 = 95, an A). We will read them all, appreciating good work when we see it, but commentary will be minimal. This is a big load for all of us.
- Above all, I aim to make these stimulating and demanding. They will not be drab reports on the reading. Let yourself enjoy them. Be creative. Think systematically and rigorously. PUT IN THE WORK. It will show and be recognized in the grade. Please take them extremely seriously, as we shall.

The two exams:

There will be a midterm and an end-term exam, each covering half the course, so no “final,” and each to be given during a 75-minute class session. The exams represent a basic tracking of the material for the course, defined above all by what transpires in the full class meetings. You must learn to take good notes – and when to take them. Each meeting will include considerable conversation, and I will flag the particular sections that demand notation for later recollection. There will be a study sheet for identifications to prepare, and essays will be based primarily on the class sessions.

Midterm exam: Monday, October 25

End-of-term exam: Monday, December 13 (last day of class)

The two papers:

Instructions for each paper will be posted on the course site well in advance of each assignment. As with the daily preparations, we will try (for the first time) a fully digital grading system. This means that papers must be posted to the “Assignments” heading on Brightspace by the beginning of class on the due date. Here are brief descriptions of the two papers:

- a. Paper no. 1 (6 PAGES) – **Due Wednesday, October 6:** The first paper is intended to develop skill in careful reading and analysis of primary evidence, the raw material for any knowledge or comprehension. To suit the biblical point of reference for the course, the main focus is from the Bible, the story of the ancestor Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar in Genesis 38. While my larger goal is to give you practice in analytical reading, this text offers a chance to consider a tale of time gone by – from the writer’s perspective! – with interest in what we can learn from it about how these people identified themselves and thought about life and their expectations from it. Judah is the ancestor for the people by that name, ultimately the Jews (Yehudim); Tamar offers a complex, surprising view of women’s lives; and the whole text is set in a religious and moral framework that stretches our expectations. As a complement to the biblical story, I will provide a legal document that offers some context for the strange marriage commitment expected of Judah and his sons, and you will need to reflect on what this evidence contributes to understanding that commitment.
- b. Paper no. 2 (6 PAGES) – **Due Wednesday, December 1.** This second paper is intended to send you into the “secondary literature,” what others have written on a given topic. These days, much of the relevant information comes to you in digital form, with varying relationship to the specialists who discover and debate the most informed interpretations of problems related to ancient Israel. This paper will allow more than one choice of focus, but all will relate to David, whom the Bible says made Jerusalem the capital of a kingdom of Israel.

NOTE ON ATTENDANCE: There is no “class participation” grade, but effort and engagement will be taken into account with grades that are near the border of two possibilities. Generally, the system of daily preparations will show us who is coming, and we will notice students who work around this system. Attendance at sections is essential for your ability to perform well in the course, and participation there will be taken seriously in grading.

Reading

All three books should be available at the NYU Bookstore.

1. *The Jewish Study Bible* (JPS Tanakh translation). This is an up-to-date Jewish translation of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. I would like everyone to use the same text, for coherence of evidence in both classwork and writing assignments.
2. *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, Michael D. Coogan editor. For historical background and context, we will work through much of this volume, which consists of separate chapters by separate authors, each with a different point of view.
3. *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, by Karel van der Toorn. A wonderful Dutch scholar wrote this volume as an alternative to standard introductions to the Bible, but intending to reach university students like you. You will get a feel for the Bible as the product of an ancient profession that you probably knew little about.

Administration

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. 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 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.

Full-class meetings

Part I: Preliminaries

September 8, Ancient Israel

Reading: Lauren Monroe and Daniel Fleming, "Earliest Israel in Highland Company," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 82 (2019) 16-23 (Bobst digital)

Primary evidence: Judges 4-5

September 13, Israel in the Bible and without it

Reading: *Oxford History* Table of Contents; Preface

Primary evidence: the Merenptah stele (Egypt, ca. 1207 BCE)

September 15, What to do with the Bible

Reading: *Scribal Culture* Chapters 2-4

Christopher Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel* (2010), Chapters 4 and 5 (Brightspace)

William Schniedewind, *The Finger of the Scribe: How Scribes Learned to Write the Bible* (2019), Chapter 2, "Scribal Curriculum at Kuntillet 'Ajrud" (Bobst digital)

Primary evidence: Song of Songs 1-3; Hosea 2 and 14 (scribal schooling)

September 20, Another world out there

Reading: *Scribal Culture* Chapter 1 (writing)

James Barr, "Adam and Eve, and the Chance of Immortality," Chapter 1 in *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (1992) 1-20 (Brightspace)

Sara Milstein, "The 'Magic' of Adapa," in Paul Delnero and Jacob Lauinger (eds.), *Texts and Contexts: The Circulation and Transmission of Cuneiform Texts in Social Space* (2015) 191-213 (Bobst digital)

Primary evidence: Genesis 2-3; the tale of Adapa (from Mesopotamia)

September 22, God and us

Reading: Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses* (1992) 83-107 (Brightspace)

Primary evidence: Genesis 1-3; Atrahasis (from Mesopotamia; abbreviated version in *Context of Scripture* I.450-52) (Bobst digital)

September 27, Israel's roots

Reading: *Oxford History* Chapter 1 (through Middle Bronze)

Primary evidence: “A nomad’s life” (a letter between tribal kings found at Mari, 18th century BCE) (Brightspace)

Part II: Only the Bible story: Before non-biblical sources

September 29, What to do with Genesis

Reading: *Oxford History* Chapter 1 (Late Bronze to the end)

Primary evidence: Genesis 28-31 (Jacob’s escape to Syria)

October 4, Israel arrives

Reading: *Oxford History* Chapter 3 (through tribes and tribalism)

Lauren Monroe, “On the Origins and Development of Greater Israel,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 10 (2021), section on the Song of Deborah (Bobst digital or Brightspace)

Primary evidence: Judges 5:12-23 (chapter 5, verses 12-23)

October 6, The good life: no sovereign in sight (**FIRST PAPER DUE**)

Reading: *Oxford History* Chapter 4

Elizabeth Bloch-Smith and Beth Alpert-Nakhai, “A Landscape Comes to Life: The Iron Age I,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 62 (1999) 62-92 (Bobst digital)

Primary evidence: Judges 8:4-21 (Gideon); 9:26-55 (Abimelech)

October 11, Columbus Day, **no class**

October 12 (**Tuesday – meet on Monday schedule for full class; no sections**), Women and power

Reading: Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, Chapter 11, “On Gender and Its Image” (Brightspace)

Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen* (1998), Chapter 1, “Deborah, Women, and War” (Bobst digital)

Primary evidence: “The Song of Deborah” (Judges 5)

October 13 (**Wednesday, regular schedule**), And then there were kings

Reading: *Oxford History* Chapter 5

Daniel Fleming, *The Legacy of Israel in Judah’s Bible*, Chapter 18, “Israel and Its Kings” (Bobst digital)

Primary evidence: 2 Samuel 6 (David brings the ark to Jerusalem)

October 18, Love and marriage

Reading: Carol Meyers, “‘Women of the Neighborhood’ (Ruth 4.17): Informal Female Networks in Ancient Israel,” in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (1999), 110-27 (Bobst digital and Brightspace)

Primary evidence: The book of Ruth

October 20, Archaeology’s tenth-century solution

Reading: articles by Finkelstein, Mazar, and Blum, in Reinhard G. Kratz and Hermann Spieckermann (eds.), *One God – One Cult – One Nation: Archaeological and Biblical Perspectives* (2010) (Bobst digital)

Primary evidence: the Stepped Stone Structure (*Oxford History* pp. 254-5)

October 25, **First in-class exam**

Part III: The two kingdoms: When the Bible’s story took shape

October 27, Israel and Judah: the period of two kingdoms

Reading: *Oxford History* Chapter 6 (through From Omri to Jehu)

Daniel Fleming, “The Two Kingdoms Narrative: A Late Monarchic Foundation for Historiography in the Books of Kings,” Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, November 2019 (Brightspace)

Primary evidence: 1 Kings 16 (especially Omri of Israel);

November 1, How the other side lives (or, Israel in the east)

Reading: Bruce Routledge, *Moab in the Iron Age* (2004) Chapter 7 (Brightspace)

Primary evidence: the Mesha Inscription (*Context of Scripture* II.137-8); Deuteronomy 2:1 – 3:11; 2 Kings 3

November 3, The House of David

Reading: *Oxford History* Chapter 6 (the rest)

Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, *The House of David* (2016), Chapter 7, “The House of David in History” (Bobst digital)

Primary evidence: the Tel Dan Inscription (*Context of Scripture* II.161-2) (Bobst digital); 1 Kings 12:1-24

November 8, What if God was married?

Reading: Judith Hadley, “Some Drawings and Inscriptions on Two Pithoi from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” *Vetus Testamentum* 37 (1987) 180-213 (Bobst digital)

(Schniedewind from September 15)

Primary evidence: the drawings at the end of Hadley’s article and the short texts cited; Jeremiah 44

November 10, Judah alone

Reading: *Oxford History* Chapter 7 (through Survival under Assyrian Vassalage)

Primary evidence: Assyrian royal annals for Sennacherib’s third campaign (*Context of Scripture* II.302-3) (Bobst digital); 2 Kings 18-19

November 15, Yellow journalism and purple prose: writing like a prophet

Reading: *Scribal Culture* Chapter 7 (The Book of Jeremiah as Scribal Artifact)

Primary evidence: Jeremiah 1, 5, 20, 26, 29, 36, 38

November 17, Judah the ideal and the end of Judah

Reading: *Oxford History* Chapter 7 (King Josiah to the end)

Quinn Daniels on the Yabneh-Yam inscription

Primary evidence: 2 Kings 22-25; the Hebrew inscription from Yabneh-Yam (Mesad-Hashavyahu), ca. late 7th century BCE

Part IV: After the kingdoms; and the thought-world of the Bible

November 22, The Psalms and Jerusalem, worship and scribal practice

Reading: To be announced

Primary evidence: To be announced

November 24, travel day for Thanksgiving (**no class**)

November 29, Judah’s Bible: The idea of revelation

Reading: *Scribal Culture* Chapter 8 (Inventing Revelation)

Primary evidence: Lamentations; 1 Chronicles 29:29; 2 Chronicles 9:29 and 35:25

December 1, Away from home: Jewish refugees and resettlement (**SECOND PAPER DUE**)

Reading: Karel van der Toorn, *Becoming Diaspora Jews: Behind the Story of Elephantine* (2019), Chapter 1, “Elephantine Revisited” (Bobst digital)

Primary evidence: letters from Elephantine (Pritchard *Ancient Near East*, 448-52) (Bobst digital)

December 6, When you talk about sex

Reading: David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible* (2001),
Chapter 1, "Introduction: The Bible and *eros*" (Bobst digital)

Primary evidence: Genesis 19; Genesis 30; Judges 19; Hosea 1-3; Ezekiel 16; Song of
Songs 4

December 8, Ancient Hebrew psychology

Reading: Matthew Suriano, "Breaking Bread with the Dead: Katumuwa's Stele, Hosea 9:4,
and the Early History of the Soul," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 134 (2014)
385-405 (Bobst digital)

Primary evidence: Genesis 2:7; 35:18; Deuteronomy 12:23; the Katumuwa stele

December 13, **Second in-class exam**