

English 45 A, Fall 2010  
Bible as Literature  
Smallenburg

Required text:

*Oxford Annotated Bible, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed.* (available at PCC Bookstore and Bookmart, across the street on Colorado)

Useful supplementary books:

Ehrman, Bart. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. Oxford, 2004.

Gabel, John B. et al. *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction*. Oxford, 2006.

Harris, Stephen L. *Understanding the Bible*. McGraw Hill, 2002.

Tullock, John H., and Mark McEntire. *The Old Testament Story*. New Jersey, 2006.

Download from [www.harrysmallenburg.com/student](http://www.harrysmallenburg.com/student)

Bible Time Line (approximate dates for various books of the Bible and relation to significant historical events)

Bibliography (5 pages of modern historical and critical scholarship)

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The Bible has been the foundation for Western culture since approximately the fourth century CE when Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Translated into more than 1000 languages since then, the Bible contains legends, folklore, the origin story central to western thinking and belief, drama, poetry, tales and parables, as well as laws, rituals, and philosophy. **The Hebrew Bible** (Old Testament)—written by various authors from approximately the tenth to the fourth centuries BCE—purports to be the history of the growth and development of a nation, from the first humans to the Israelites' wars with invading and/or occupying countries. The Hebrew Bible is also a collection of primary religious documents, laws, proverbs, heroic stories, and theological interpretations of historical events. **The Christian Bible** (New Testament)—again, by various writers (only one of whom is known for certain) over a roughly 75-year period—consists of four versions of stories about Jesus, a narrative describing events in the lives of his earliest followers, the earliest known “Christian” writings (letters of Paul) that begin to work out basic Christian theology, and an apocalyptic text describing a final judgment on earth.

In this class we will be reading the Bible as a combination of literature, history, and sociology created in response to political/historical circumstances and intended to reassure, inspire and unify the Hebrews at a critical juncture in their history (Hebrew Bible). The Christian Bible has a similar origin in critical historical events two generations after the death of Jesus.

“Literary reading” means just what it would mean with novels, short stories, poems, plays, or essays: read for overall storyline, or overall development of a poem. Figure out what characters do, whether a text is critical of them or favorable to them. Let the text generate and control its meanings. Try not to approach it with meanings already in mind. Don’t isolate verses from their contexts in order to “prove” pre-established theological/moral/ethical/faith points, though of course you will have to select passages to support interpretive points, as in any literary discussion.

To get the most out of each assignment, complete the reading before coming to class. Read the assignment through once, taking notes; then read it a second time, taking more notes and writing down questions to bring in for discussion. Always be prepared for quizzes, both on videos and readings.

A brief note about the “inerrancy” of the Bible: i.e., the premise that every word in the Bible is “the word of God,” and therefore every word in the Bible is literally true—there can be no “errors.” This is a “faith” perspective; if you attend a church or synagogue that may be the approach. A critical, scholarly, historical perspective does not make that assumption; we will recognize discrepancies—i.e., passages that are inconsistent with each other, and which cannot therefore both be true. These are not “errors” in the text but can be explained often by differing textual traditions. Other passages may conflict with what we know of the world by common experience, or the tradition of methodologies for understanding that have developed over the past four or five centuries, long after the Biblical texts were written. For purposes of this class, we will not assume that the natural world operated differently 3,000 years ago than it does now. In fiction and folklore, mules talk and people return to land after being swallowed by a whale. In the real world these things don’t happen and never did. Other passages are simply incompatible with modern life and unacceptable to most people in modern culture (e.g. any passage that approves slavery). We are still, as a culture, sorting out what parts of the Bible can be integrated into modern life and what parts cannot.

## **Assignment schedule**

1. 8/30 Introduction  
9/1 Introduction, continued

### **THE HEBREW BIBLE: Israelites in the Promised Land**

2. 9/6 Labor Day: no class  
9/8 History of the Hebrew Monarchy: 1 Samuel
3. 9/13 2 Samuel 1-12  
9/15 2 Samuel 13-24
4. 9/20 1 Kings

- 9/22 The Prophets: Moral Conscience of the Israelites  
Isaiah 1-11
5. 9/27 Isaiah 12-20; 39; Ezekiel (passages to be selected)  
9/29 Flex Day: no class
6. 10/4 **The Problem of God's Justice:** Book of Job 1-21 (Wisdom Literature)  
10/6 Job 22-42
7. 10/11 Catch up  
10/13 Midterm
8. 10/18 **Creation of a National/Social/Cultural/Religious Tradition**  
The Great National Epic: Genesis 1-25  
10/20 The Great National Epic: Genesis 1-25 (cont)
9. 10/25 The Great National Epic: Genesis 26-50  
10/27 The Great National Epic continued: Exodus 1-20
10. 11/1 Great National Epic: Exodus 21-end  
11/3 How to carry out God's will: readings in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Numbers  
tba

### **THE CHRISTIAN BIBLE: BREAKAWAY FROM THE PARENT FAITH**

11. 11/8 Working out details—earliest extant writings—Paul's letters: read Paul:  
Letter to the Thessalonians  
11/10 Paul: Letter to the Corinthians
12. 11/15 Letter to the Corinthians, cont.  
11/17 Letter to the Romans
13. 11/22 Gospel of Mark  
11/24 Gospel of Mark (cont.)
14. 11/29 Gospel of Luke: 1-12  
12/1 Gospel of Luke: 13-end
15. 12/6 Gospel of John  
12/8 Book of Revelation
16. Finals week

## Student Learning Outcomes

Students will be able to

1. Identify events and important figures in selected books of the Bible.
2. Identify similarities and differences between these books.
3. Explain ideas and themes employed in these books.
4. Relate these books to literary contexts such as genre and formal/thematic traditions.
5. Interpret passages from these books.
6. Evaluate literary-critical views of these books.
7. Demonstrate knowledge of the social, religious, and political contexts in which the books were written.
8. Demonstrate knowledge of major textual problems and problems of authorship concerning these books.

Grading criteria: Quizzes, papers, exams: 59%  
Attendance: 28%  
Productive participation: 13%

Note: we are encouraged to include a breakdown of the relative importance of various components of your grade. Obviously there is no way to determine with statistical exactness such numbers as the above. However, roughly speaking, this is how I determine your grade.