Introduction to Sacred Scripture

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This course is intended to prepare the student for subsequent study of the Bible by introducing the Bible through a presentation of its various literary forms and categories, its basic themes, its overall narrative thrust, and its overarching concern and message. Viewed from the perspective of faith, approaches Scripture as a whole, unified work, at a supernatural level, while remaining faithful to issues regarding human authorship, specifics of historical and cultural context throughout the Bible, and variations in the textual tradition of Scripture as received by the Catholic Church. Students in this course will be equipped to:

- give a brief historical account of the development of the concept of a biblical canon regarded as a textual revelation from God that includes the books of the New Testament;
- identify the broad classes of text in the Bible and explain how those classes of texts are distinguished or defined;
- describe the overall narrative thrust of the Bible from Creation to the Eschaton,
- identify and describe the major themes of the Bible, in particular, as they appear represented in the various classes of text as they are presented in this course;
- explain what is meant by terms such as Torah, prophesy, psalm, and gospel, not only as classes of text but as theological concepts.
A Note on Texts for this Course
In an effort to be concise, we have selected readings from two books published by Wilfrid J. Harrington, O.P., which are straightforward, clear, and orthodox, brief and yet thorough, in that they provide overviews of all the texts of the Catholic Bible. They are the second and third volumes of his three-volume work, Key to the Bible, which is currently out of print, but scheduled to be reprinted by Logos Bible project, where the whole set is available for pre-order here: https://www.logos.com/product/54200/key-to-the-bible#003
Otherwise, the books can be found used or in facsimile reprint additions online, but you have to search for them. Some sellers think several hundred dollars per volume is reasonable, but I do not. With a bit of searching, the texts can be found for around $10.00 each or less.
Alternatively, the student should refer to any good Catholic study Bible and simply read the introductions to the classes of literature being presented in each lesson, and to each of the books in that class. This approach is likely to be somewhat more involved and more cumbersome, however, which is why it is not presented as my first recommendation.
Classes of Text in the Bible

The Bible is composed of an extensive library of books collected into an integrated whole over the course of many centuries. There are many different kinds of literature included in this vast collection. How does an understanding of the different kinds of literature encountered in the Bible help us to understand how any given text in Scripture ought to be understood? Do we read a poem the same way we read a historical narrative or a liturgical hymn or a rubrical instruction or an allegorical narrative? Could we impede our own reception of the real meaning of the Scriptures by reading them through a lens inappropriate to the kind of literature represented there?

Not only were there several distinct stages of biblical development before the time of Christ, but the introduction of new literature in the decades following Christ’s appearance raised new questions about how to think about God’s self-revelation through the mediation of a text. What group of texts seems to be the common denominator for all those who believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? In other words, what texts are held in common as embodiments of divine self-revelation by Catholic and Orthodox Christians, Protestants, all contemporary Jews, the ancient Sadducees, and even to Samaritans?

The whole Old Testament is often referred to by Jews as the TaNaKh or the Mikra. What do these words mean? Holding on to the idea of Mikra in thinking about the next two questions, how does this idea help us to understand them? When the human authors of the New Testament referred to “the Scriptures,” what did they mean? How did the earliest Christians think about the New Testament writings in relation to the texts of the Old Testament? When and how did the idea develop that the New Testament writings held a status on par with the writings of the Old Testament?
Classes of Text in the Bible

Notes:
The Narrative Thrust of the Bible

How does the concept of creation stand at the very center of the idea of God as depicted in the Bible? What assertion is being made in the idea of creation, properly understood? All human beings, everywhere, have some idea of human agency and human moral praise and blame. But the Judeo-Christian tradition has a unique understanding of the idea of sin and how it should be viewed, in its essence, with reference to God. How does the Bible present this idea?

The idea of “election” is often associated with a rather particular set of theological opinions about the particular fate of individuals. But the biblical concept of election is actually much broader than this. How does this concept take us right back to the idea of creation itself, in the original language of the first chapter of Genesis? How did the ancient Hebrew people understand the idea of election relative to their national identity? How did the Hebrew people gradually come to understand the concept of election, as seen, for example, in the Prophetic literature and then fulfilled in the Gospels?

Today, we speak a great deal of the “universal salvific will” of God. Where does this idea come from? How do we see this idea introduced in the Bible through the themes of Israel as a light to the nations, Christ the New Man, Christ in relation to the ideas of creation and election, and the Promised Land and the New Creation? With these themes as our key to understanding the idea of the “universal salvific will,” what does this phrase really mean and what doesn’t it mean?
The Narrative Thrust of the Bible
The Torah or Pentateuch


What are the central concerns of the books of Genesis and Exodus in presenting a “primordial history” of the world, a narrative of the ancestral lineage of the great patriarchs of the Hebrew nation, and the rise of Moses, giver of the Law? How does this project establish for the reader the very perception of reality characteristic of faith in God?

In the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, what is the relationship between the ideas of Promise and Election?
In the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, what is the relationship between the ideas of Covenant and Law?

How is the Covenant–Law relationship revealed through the episodes involving Noah, Abraham, and finally, Sinai?

In the idea of Covenant Law, we find both an absolute and immutable and, also, a situational and alterable dimension. Explain this distinction, identifying concrete examples of each, and consider how this distinction informs St. Paul in his solution to the problem of the reception of gentiles into the covenantal life of the Church.
The Torah or Pentateuch

Notes:
The Historical Books, Chronicles, and Acts


In the historical books of the Bible, which here include Chronicles and the New Testament book of Acts, the whole history of the People of God is traced out in theological terms. In other words, these texts do more than simply tell an objective story about what happened. They interpret what happened in terms of its theological significance. In broad, if overly general terms, how do the various texts in this larger class of texts interpret the theological significance of the various stages of our history? Consider the following:

· In the Book of Joshua, how is the conquest of the Holy Land understood? How was it possible that the Hebrew people were able to overwhelm those whom they conquered from a position of apparent impotence? What did they think this meant? Is there a cautionary element in this narrative?

· How is the arrangement of the Judges a different approach to national governance than is found in other cultures? How and why is this arrangement seen as God’s original intention for his People? If the Hebrew People are ruled by Judges, do they have a king? If so, who is it?

· In 1&2 Samuel, we see the rise of the Prophet as a recognized divine office. How is this role presented and why is it so important? How does it serve as the interpretive subtext as we read the stories of Saul and David and move on toward the eventual conquest of Israel by her pagan neighbors?
The Historical Books, Chronicles, and Acts

• In 1&2 Kings, we see the decline of the monarchy through hubris. How do we see the relationship between the king and the whole People depicted in the fate of the nation?

• In 1&2 Chronicles, the sins of the people at a cultural level are interpreted as the cause of their conquest and captivity. According to this view, would they have been conquered had they remained faithful to the covenant? Why did God allow their conquest and their captivity as a consequence of their sins?

• In Ezra and Nehemiah, we see the Jews return from Exile, rebuild the temple, reestablish temple worship, and introduce the Torah. According to the theological interpretation of history depicted in these texts, what made these events possible? What necessary spiritual preconditions allowed for these events to unfold?

• In 1&2 Maccabees, we see a new attempt at conquest and the sacking of the temple—a new attempt to alienate the Hebrew People from God. In this narrative, though, the story is told as a call to holiness and fidelity to the covenant in spite of all obstacles, in radical faith that God will triumph over all. With this in mind, what does this text tell us about the tension that will always exist between secular aspirations for power and the God of the Bible?

• In the Book of Acts, even in the midst of an earthly empire that no human power could hope to resist, we see the establishment of new kind of Kingdom, the logic of which belongs to another realm. How is this idea the fulfillment of all the expectations at work throughout the whole historical narrative of the Bible up to this point?
The Historical Books, Chronicles, and Acts
The Prophets


What is the meaning of the terms nabi and bnai hanebim? What is the meaning of the term propheteis?

How did the concept of a prophet develop in ancient Hebrew culture, and when?

In its fully mature state, does the office of Prophet differ from the various mystical speakers found in other religions?

What are the hallmarks of the Prophet and of the work he does? What is it, and what is it not?

What are the Prophet’s main responsibilities?

Name some of the main themes we find in the prophetic literature of the Bible.
The Prophets

Notes:
The Wisdom Literature


What are the four main themes characteristic of the biblical Wisdom tradition? Can you see how, taken together, these four basic insights characterize a distinctly Judeo-Christian approach to any search for wisdom or any claim that we’ve gained some insight into the deepest truths of reality?

What are two main points of interest in the book of Job, regarding Job’s identity and the mystery he faces that teach unique lessons for us? Hint: In the first, we are helped to understand the parable of the Good Samaritan, and in the second, we are provided a distinctly faith-filled perspective on the fact that bad things happen to good people.

What does the book of Proverbs teach us about the relationship between Sacred Tradition and Revelation? What are the Proverbs?
The Wisdom Literature

Qoheleth or Ecclesiastes is among the hellenistic texts of the wisdom tradition, representing the interaction between Hebrew and Greek culture, which resulted in a rich intellectual exchange. Qoheleth is a difficult text to understand, because it appears to present more of a pagan fatalism than a Hebrew optimism about reality and the fate of human beings and the cosmos. How should this book be read? What might we say that Qoheleth is really up to in his presentation?

The Song of Songs appears in the form of an erotic love poem representing a romantic dialogue between a groom and his bride. Why is this text so significant for a reading of the New Testament, in particular, of the Gospel of John? How does it serve to color our understanding of what it means to be “chosen” by God?

What similarities do we find between the books of Wisdom and Sirach in their approach to the question of wisdom, what it is, how it is attained, and what it means to be wise? Yet the two books are, in some ways, quite different. How would you characterize these differences?
The Wisdom Literature

Notes:
The Psalms


The book of psalms is composed of a broad category of literature of a poetic and hymnodic nature. We know from markings within the original manuscripts, that the psalms were set to music, the melodies of which appear to have been taken from songs familiar to the Hebrew people from outside any liturgical setting.

Today, most scholars no longer accept literal Davidic authorship of the psalms and consider that traditional appellation to have been a kind of metaphor. How might we understand Davidic authorship along the lines of our use of the phrase “Gregorian chant”?

One way scholars tend to group the psalms today is by their broad historical period. They see three major, defining periods in the history of the Hebrew People in the time after their conquest of the Holy Land. These are pre-exilic, exilic, and postexilic or before the Babylonian deportation, during the exile in Babylon, and after the return from exile. While it is not always clear where a psalm belongs in this dating schema, what characteristics would scholars identify in the psalms as distinctive of these broad periods? Can you identify at least one psalm in each of these categories, based on the perspective on his situation, or the attitude the psalmist exhibits in his prayer? What is it about each one that inclines you to say that it is a pre-exilic, exilic or postexilic psalm?
The Psalms

Scholars can identify several categories into which the psalms can be divided. Precision is not entirely possible here, but broadly, we can distinguish several types.

Can you describe the basic characteristics or concerns of these types and what sort of events might have occasioned their use?

- Psalms of supplication
- Psalms of thanksgiving
- Hymns of praise
- Royal psalms
- Psalms of Sion
- Psalms about the Kingship of Yahweh
- Psalms of wisdom and piety

Scholars also use less precise terminology for describing broad categories of psalmody. For example, lamentations and hallel psalms. What do these categories of psalms involve? Our word Alleluia, still used in Catholic liturgy today, is derived from an exclamation or proclamation represented in the hallel psalms. What does it mean?
The Psalms

Notes:
The Writings and Revelation


The books grouped here under the category of “writings” are not otherwise easily characterized and so, are “lumped together” for the purposes of simply finding a way to treat them in an efficient way in a general introduction to the Bible.

Why is the book of Ruth important in helping us find our way from the idea of Israel as a light to the nations all the way to Christianity’s incorporation of Gentiles into covenant with God? What differences do you see between the enthusiastic conversion of Ruth and her Zeal for devout observance of the rubrics of the Law and the model Paul advances in the New Testament? Though the two approaches are significantly different, what do they have in common? How does Ruth inform a proper understanding of Paul, such that we don’t see Christianity as demanding a “watering-down” of the covenant and Law?

Jonah is a prophet, but the book of Jonah is not a prophetic book. What is the real point of this book? What is the significance of Jonah’s resistance to God’s unfathomable call to missionize the Ninevites? What do we learn about God’s mercy in this narrative? How does this book represent a cautionary tale for those charged with prophetic leadership in the religious community? And what is the link between this story and what comes to be known as “the sign of Jonah,” an idea we encounter in the New Testament?
The Writings and Revelation

The book of Tobit sets a narrative of disaffection and vindication against a loose and somewhat fanciful historical and geographical backdrop. Its purpose is not to represent history and geography as they were, but instead, to tell a story of how God comes to the aid of the righteous and the downtrodden, and especially, in defense of the family.

While the drama is told with reference to the pathetic figure of the aged Tobit, it really centers on the relationship between the beautiful but deadly Sarah and her suiter, Tobias. What appears as the central moral concern in this drama? Who is the figure of the terrible demon, Asmodeus? How does Tobit resist him, with the aid of the archangel Raphael? What is the real, spiritual reason Tobias does not die as had Sarah’s first seven husbands? Do you see any Christological significance in the fact that Tobias, the eighth husband, defeats Asmodeus and becomes Sarah’s true and lasting husband?

Baruch is not a prophetic book, though it seems intended as an exploration of the themes found in the preaching of Jeremiah as represented in the book that bears his name. In particular, Baruch explores the nature of sin, the quality of true repentance, and the merciful disposition of God. How does Baruch understand sin and how, then, does he understand repentance? How does he see the relationship between Law and righteousness, and between justice and mercy?

Lamentations is basically a series of sorrowful poems. What occasioned these poems? What do we learn from these lamentations about the plight of the suffering People of God and the hope we hold out for redemption from sin and vindication from injustice?
The Writings and Revelation

Daniel is, for the most part, a work of so-called “apocalyptic” literature. It’s purpose appears to have been to provide a spiritual perspective and a basis of confident hope for the Hebrew People suffering under the oppression of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, during the Maccabean period, by setting a parallel scene in the time of the Babylonian Exile, where the king, Nebuchadnezzar plays the role of the antagonist.

Through the use of apocalyptic imagery, Daniel presents a theological interpretation of history, its currents, and its final outcome. What is the central message he wishes to communicate here? Why, on the basis of the setting of the book, must the Son of Man motif play a central role in Daniel’s theology of history? What will become of the kingdoms of this World, and how will history finally be resolved in righteousness and vindication?

In the book of Esther, a great emperor commands the eradication of the Hebrew People, who, by this point, are no longer strictly localized within their home nation. Why does this emperor command that they be destroyed? How is this event and its resolution more than a story of some past events but a story of what is always about to happen, and what does happen repeatedly, throughout history, when secular authorities with totalitarian aspirations encounter the People of God? How, further, does this book serve to embolden us when these events recur in our own time?
The Writings and Revelation

The apocalyptic book of Judith turns on a similar theme to that at work in the book of Esther, but takes a different perspective. While Esther emphasizes the separateness of the Jewish people from the rest of the world, Judith moves in the direction of the solidarity of God’s people. The Samaritans are not depicted here is irrevocably alienated from the rest of God’s people, and this very late book (perhaps written in the first century B.C.) already prepares us for the parable of the Good Samaritan, and finally, for the welcoming of Gentiles into covenant with God. How does this fact move in the direction of a more nuanced and spiritual understanding of the vindication of God’s people over their enemies than we might previously have found emphasized?

In the book of Revelation, in the New Testament, we find yet another example of apocalyptic literature in the Bible. This text borrows heavily from the imagery found in the visions of Ezekiel and Daniel, as well as motifs discoverable in the book of Judith, insofar as Judith may appear as a corporate personality, like the Woman of Revelation 12. As in the case of Daniel and Judith, Revelation is occasioned by a period of persecution of God’s people at the hands of a seemingly invincible earthly power. As in the case of Daniel, the visionary of the book of Revelation advances a theological interpretation of history. How, specifically, is the relationship between the historical situation of the Church and the broader contours of history understood in the book of Revelation? How does the introduction of the idea of the nearness of Eternity to time, and our direct, mystical access to Eternity, represent a new and solution to problem of God’s suffering People?
The Writings and Revelation

Notes:
The Gospels


The Gospels represent a unique form of literature, though some might argue that the Gospel of John and the so-called “synoptic gospels” should not be regarded as the same literary form. That question aside, what is a “gospel” as a literary genre? What characterizes it as a unique device for the purpose of evangelizing through a literary means?

Why are the “synoptic gospels” called “synoptic?”

What are the reasons generally given for the thesis that the Gospel of Mark was written before the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke?

Are these arguments conclusive? Should we be cautious of any unspoken presuppositions at work in this argument?

Why does the Church preserve four distinct Gospels? Does each Gospel approach the mystery of the Christ-event from a distinct point of emphasis?

If so, how might you characterize those points of emphasis in each of the four gospels?
The Gospels

Notes:
The New Testament Letters


The apostolic letter is not unique to the New Testament as a literary form. It was widely used throughout the ancient world. What are its broad characteristics and what is this form of literature specifically intended to establish? How is that fact already an important data point on its own for an understanding of the Church in the New Testament?

Has the genre of the apostolic letter survived in the Church even now? How do the New Testament letters reveal the complex profile of the early Church? Do we see evidence in the New Testament letters of Christian communities that were certainly still almost entirely Jewish? Do we see evidence of Christian communities that were rooted in Jewish synagogue communities but have become integrated with Gentile converts? If so, what sorts of tensions do we find there? Are there any general lessons we learn from the New Testament letters about what forms of ecclesiastical organization appear from the very beginning about any failed experiments on that front?

We’ve included the book of Hebrews in this lesson, but in fact, it does not follow precisely the format of an apostolic letter. When was this letter most likely written and why? According to the early Church historian, Eusebius, who have been named as likely candidates for this letter’s authorship? Do you find anything interesting or significant in that hypothesis?