



McMaster Divinity
College

WHAT'S THAT BOOK YOU'RE READING?

PERSPECTIVES ON THE BIBLE

NT 3P1310 (BS/CC)

McMaster Divinity College
Dr. Christopher D. Land
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Winter 2026
Thursday 4:00–5:50pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The Bible did not descend from heaven as a leather-bound book in King James English, nor did it come with a user's guide. Rather, it is a multifaceted book with a complex history, and it can be read and received in many different ways.

In this course, we will look behind the biblical texts (at their cultural contexts and compositional history), within the biblical texts (at their literary and linguistic characteristics), and in front of the biblical texts (at their readers and their reception in church and society). In other words, we will explore *where the Bible came from* and *how people read it*.

SPECIALIZATIONS

The NT 3XL3 course is available for multiple specializations:

- ∞ Students taking this as a *Biblical Studies (BS)* course will be encouraged to consider the work of biblical scholarship as an academic discipline, to better appreciate the influences it can have on how people read Scripture.
- ∞ Students taking this as a *Church and Culture (CC)* course will be encouraged to consider different views of the Bible, to better appreciate their cultural origins and theological implications.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Through your active participation in this course, you will:

KNOWING

- Know some of the archeological and socio-cultural history that is relevant to the Bible;
- Understand debates regarding historiography and the historicity of the Bible;

- Understand debates regarding the compositional history of the biblical texts (e.g. documentary hypothesis, synoptic problem, etc.);
- Be familiar with introductory matters pertaining to the individual books of the Bible (i.e. date, provenance, authorship, etc.);
- Distinguish the major genres of the Bible and appreciate their distinctive social functions and literary conventions;
- Know about the processes by which the biblical canon was formed;
- Understand the process of textual transmission and the importance of textual criticism;
- Understand the complexities involved in Bible translation and the principles that underlie different modern translations;
- Be familiar with different approaches to scripture that are characteristic of different Christian traditions;
- Understand the role of the reader(s) in the process of biblical interpretation.

BEING

- Experience how a hermeneutic of suspicion can actually lead to better listening;
- Gain greater self-awareness of yourself as a reader of scripture;
- Develop an informed embrace of the Bible as both inspired and authoritative;
- Appreciate the importance of participating in critical and respectful discussions concerning biblical texts.

DOING

- Have the ability to locate useful resources and the wisdom to differentiate between reliable and unreliable resources;
- Have the ability to read and respond to scholarly discussions regarding the Bible;
- Have the ability to formulate clear (even if tentative) positions with respect to controversial issues and to articulate coherent arguments in support of those positions;
- Have the ability to articulate a theological perspective on the Bible along with a practical explanation of how it should be handled by the church.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

This is a graduate-level seminar, so students are expected to attend class and to participate in class discussions. Students who consistently fail to attend class will not be eligible for a passing grade in the course. If an absence is unavoidable, please email me in advance to explain your situation. If you are an in-person student and you are ill, you should email me in advance even if you plan to attend class online.

In addition, students are required to complete all of the course assignments. Failure to complete an assignment may serve as grounds for failure of the course. All assignments must be formatted according to the MDC Style Guide (i.e. standard page layout, appropriate citation formatting, proper spelling, etc.). Written assignments must be uploaded to Avenue to Learn as Word documents (.doc, .docx). Unless

alternative arrangements are made in advance, a penalty of 2% per day will be applied to all late assignments. Late submissions (even ones with an extension) will not receive detailed comments from the professor and may not be returned at the same time as work submitted on time. Assignments cannot be submitted after the final week of class without written permission from the Office of the Registrar (mdcreq@mcmaster.ca).

CLASS PARTICIPATION (6 x 5% = 30%)

For each of the main course modules, we will have a week of lecturing followed by a week of discussion. To prepare for the small-group discussions, you will prepare a discussion prompt that responds to some specific point(s) made in the lecture. You can engage with the lecture content directly (e.g. extending an idea, disputing an idea, offering an alternative proposal, etc.). Alternatively, you can explore the idea in relation to yourself or your community (e.g. reflecting on how the idea is standard, or novel, or challenging, or disruptive, or dangerous), or in relation to its implications (e.g. relating the idea to other ideas that are important to you or your community, or to practical matters for which it has implications). Regardless of what you wish to discuss, your discussion prompt must offer a thoughtful, substantive, respectful reaction that demonstrates your own learning and that could potentially contribute to the learning of others in the class.

Each discussion prompt should be roughly 250–500 words. Discussion prompts are **due at 11:59pm on Friday for each of the weeks noted in the schedule below**. Please bring your prompt to class the following week so that you can read it aloud to your discussion group.

READING QUESTIONNAIRES (4 x 10% = 40%)

Over the course of the semester, you will read four books that explore different perspectives on the Bible. For each book, you will submit a written response and then engage in a brief small-group discussion with other students. The written response will not be an essay; you can simply **complete the questionnaire below in approximately 1,000–1,500 words**. Reports are **due at 11:59pm on Friday for each of the weeks noted in the schedule below**.

1. Would you describe yourself (prior to reading the book) as well-informed about the topics discussed in the book? What about your current Christian community? Either way, can you explain this level of awareness? What are some factors (positive or negative) that might encourage people to explore these topics, or that might discourage them from doing so? How might you help yourself or your community to become more informed and mature as regards the topics discussed in the book?
2. How has the information presented in the book broadened or deepened your understanding of the Bible's origin, its character, and/or the ways that it can be read? Give some examples of information that expanded your understanding of the Bible and/or what is involved in reading it.
3. Do you strongly agree or disagree with any of the claims made by the book? How do you think your current Christian community would react to the book? Identify some noteworthy claims

from the book and then give specific reasons for their acceptance or rejection. If you don't know whether to agree or disagree, discuss what is preventing you from coming to a decision.

4. Why does the topic of the book matter? In practical terms, how do the issues discussed in the book affect the way that individuals and churches interact with the Bible? In what way will *you* interact with the Bible differently because of the things you have learned from the book?

BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP REPORT (10% + 20% = 30%)

Both non-Christians and Christians ask interesting questions about the Bible, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to know where to find reliable information. In a world of fake news and “alternative facts,” you need to research issues carefully to arrive at informed opinions about them. Unfortunately, this crucial task is undermined by the (apparent) inaccessibility of technical, scholarly discussions, and by the (true) realization that even good scholarship is affected by personal or communal biases. If the experts are so divided amongst themselves, how is the non-expert supposed to benefit from reading their discussions? In the end, many people surrender fully to confirmation bias. Both critics and supporters of the Bible engage biblical scholarship in a very shallow manner, with “expert opinions” invoked chiefly to support pre-established convictions.

In this assignment, you will seek to demonstrate (most importantly to yourself!) that: (1) you are capable of finding informed scholarly discussions of biblical topics; (2) you are capable of reading and understanding those discussions; (3) you are capable of explaining, in a manner that is sympathetic to all sides in a debate, why there is a debate (i.e. how the available evidence is interpreted differently by different parties to the discussion); (4) you are capable of identifying if/how the debate matters, to whom, and why; and (5) you are capable of articulating your personal conviction (however tentative) together with some reasons for it (however preliminary).

You are free to select from the following research questions. However, they are merely suggestive. If you have another research question in mind, please contact me to confirm its suitability for this assignment.

- What's up with the Nephilim in Genesis 6?
- Did Moses really lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?
- Who wrote Deuteronomy and why?
- Did the Israelites really conquer Canaan?
- Did David really write the psalms attributed to him?
- Why does the Bible contain two accounts of the monarchies (i.e. Samuel–Kings & Chronicles)?
- Is Esther an entertaining “historical novella” or a recounting of actual historical events?
- Did King Solomon write Ecclesiastes?
- Who composed the Book of Isaiah, and when?
- Is the Book of Jonah history, prophecy, and/or something else?
- What is the meaning of the four beastly kingdoms in Daniel 7?
- Why do only Matthew and Luke have birth stories, and why are they so different?
- Who wrote the Gospel of John, and why is it so unlike the Synoptics?
- Did Paul really write 1 Timothy?

- What's up with Jude invoking the *Testament of Moses* and *1 Enoch*?
- Is the Book of Revelation an attempt to predict the future?
- Who decided what books should be in the canon, and when, and how?
- How is it that New Testament authors can claim that Jesus is the fulfilment of Old Testament passages, but then read those passages in ways nobody ever read them before?
- Why do people get so passionate about specific Bible translations? Are some translations really more faithful to Scripture than others?

Stage 1 – Prep Work (10%)

Your first task will be to find the most helpful scholarly sources that discuss your question. To demonstrate completion of this initial task, you will submit a progress update midway through the semester in the form of an **annotated bibliography (worth 10% overall)** that includes scholarly sources pertinent to your chosen question. You are strongly urged to consult a *variety of sources*, including scholarly commentaries, dictionaries, encyclopedias, scholarly monographs, and peer-reviewed periodicals. The information represented by your bibliography must be *up-to-date* (i.e. it must contain at least one good summary of the discussion that has been published within the last fifteen years). You must include sources that *represent different points of view* on the question, so that you do not encounter a major view on the issue solely by reading its opponents. You must annotate at least twelve (12) of your sources (a single sentence for each is fine) to summarize how they will contribute to your final report. **Each annotation should be roughly 50–150 words; no annotation should be longer than 300 words.** Your work must demonstrate that you have searched widely for the best available sources, and that you have interacted carefully enough with your chosen sources to be confident that you have obtained a representative sample of scholarly answers to your chosen question.

Together with your bibliography, you will submit a list (bullet points are fine) of **the main issues** that surround your research question and **the main positions** taken by biblical scholars on those issues. These preliminary materials will allow you to receive early feedback from your instructor(s), so that you can produce a solid final report.

Your annotated bibliography and list of issues/positions are **due at 11:59pm on Friday, February 27th**.

Stage 2 – Final Submissions (10% + 10% = 20%)

Having carefully researched your question by reading the best available biblical scholarship, you will produce two final statements.

First, you will prepare **a synthesis of the relevant scholarly discussion that surrounds your research question (approx. 1,500 words, worth 10% overall)**. This synthesis should be suitable as a formal report, such as might be submitted to a congregational or denominational committee. Readers of the statement should gain from it an informed (and unbiased) overview of the main scholarly responses that have been given to your question, together with an accompanying bibliography of at least 12 sources (without annotations at this stage).

Second, you will prepare **a personal position paper that explores the contemporary significance of the issue and that articulates your own personal convictions on the matter (approx. 1,500 words, worth 10% overall)**. This statement should likewise be suitable as a formal report, such as might be submitted as part of an ordination process. It need not be neutral, obviously, but it ought to display good Christian virtues in the way that it discusses and assesses alternative positions. Specifically, it must display self-awareness as regards your perspective on the Bible. Citations are necessary only if you quote someone or introduce new material not mentioned in the scholarly synthesis; for the most part, you can simply assume and rely upon your scholarly synthesis.

Your synthesis and position paper are **due at 11:59pm on Friday, April 10th**.

GRADING SUMMARY

Lecture Discussion Prompts	6 x 5% = 30%
Reading Questionnaires	4 X 10% = 40%
<u>Biblical Scholarship Report</u>	<u>10% + 10% + 10% = 30%</u>
Total	100%

TEXTBOOKS

All students are required to possess an English translation of the Bible, as well as:

Walton, John H. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*. 2nd edition. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018. (316 pages)

Walton, John H., and D. Brent Sandy. *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2013. (309 pages)

Keen, Karen R. *The Word of a Humble God: The Origins, Inspiration, and Interpretation of Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022. (189 pages)

Westphal, Merold. *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church*. The Church and Postmodern Culture. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009. (156 pages)

All required textbooks for this class are available from the Hurlburt Family Bookstore located beside the MDC chapel entrance. For advance purchase, you may contact READ On Bookstore, 5 International Blvd, Etobicoke, ON, M9A 3C3; phone 416.620.2934; mobile 416.668.3434; email books@readon.ca. Other book services may also carry the texts.

SCHEDULE

NB: Every effort will be made to avoid cancelling classes, but if a class must be cancelled or moved fully online then an announcement will be posted on Avenue to Learn (A2L). Please check for announcements each week before coming on campus.

Week	Meetings (Thursday @ 4pm)	Assignments (Due Friday @ 11:59pm)
Jan 5–9	Biblical Scholarship as Bible Study?	
Jan 12–16	OT Traditions and Texts	Lecture Discussion Prompt
Jan 19–23		<i>ANE Thought</i> Questionnaire
Jan 26–30	NT Traditions and Texts	Lecture Discussion Prompt
Feb 2–6		<i>World of Scripture</i> Questionnaire
Feb 9–13	Biblical Genres	Lecture Discussion Prompt
Feb 16–20		(Reading Week)
Feb 23–27		Annotated Bibliography & List of Issues/Positions
Mar 2–6	Canon	Lecture Discussion Prompt
Mar 9–13		<i>Word of a Humble God</i> Questionnaire
Mar 16–20	Hermeneutics	Lecture Discussion Prompt
Mar 23–27		<i>Whose Community</i> Questionnaire
Mar 30–Apr 3	Translation	Lecture Discussion Prompt
Apr 6–10		Synthesis & Position Paper

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STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC HONESTY

Academic dishonesty is not qualitatively different from other types of dishonesty. It consists of misrepresenting the ownership of written work by deception or by other fraudulent means. In an

academic setting this may include any number of forms such as: copying or using unauthorized aids in tests, examinations; plagiarism, i.e., submitting work that is not one's own (regardless of the means of its production, including AI) but passing it off as if it is; submitting work for credit in a course for which credit is being or has already been given, unless the previously submitted work was presented as such to the instructor of the second course and has been deemed acceptable for credit by the instructor of that course; aiding and abetting another student's dishonesty; giving false information for the purposes of gaining admission or credit; giving false information for the purposes of obtaining deferred examinations or extension of deadlines; forging or falsifying McMaster University or McMaster Divinity College documents.

Students are responsible for understanding what constitutes academic dishonesty. Please refer to the Divinity College Statement on Academic Honesty at:

<http://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/programs/rules-regulations>

A useful guide to avoiding plagiarism is the Harvard Guide to Using Sources:

<http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do>

In this course, we will be using a web-based service (Turnitin.com) for plagiarism detection and the student's continuation in the course represents his or her consent to the use of this service. If a student has objections to the use of this service, alternate arrangements for assignment submission must be made with the professor in advance of the assignment deadlines.

A special note about AI: You are expected to do your own thinking and to write your own papers, etc., and not to have AI do this work for you. There may be value in using an AI tool to help you locate and collate resources or to help you "tidy up" your English grammar, usage, and mechanics, especially if English is not your native language. However, using AI to create content for you and then submitting that content as if you created it is considered plagiarism (i.e., submitting work that is not one's own as if it is one's own) and is a violation of the academic honesty policy.

STYLE

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the latest edition of the McMaster Divinity College *Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses*:

<https://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/sites/default/files/documents/mdcstyleguide.pdf>

Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

GENDER INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names

of God should be respected, but you will need to use gender-inclusive language for humans, and you will need to quote from a gender-inclusive version such as, for example, the following: NRSVue (2022), TEV/GNB/GNT (1976), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), NIV (2011), and the CEB (2011).

AODA

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), the content of this course is intended to be accessible to all students who are enrolled in the course, including those with disabilities. If a student requires accommodation to participate fully in this course, that student is to contact SAS at McMaster University, who will then work directly with the McMaster Divinity College Registrar to negotiate reasonably appropriate accommodation for the student. The MDC Registrar will communicate with faculty regarding necessary accommodations. Please note that an accommodation is not retroactive and must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation.

ABSENSE DUE TO ILLNESS

If you must miss class due to an illness, you must contact me (via email) as soon as possible to let me know. Likewise, if I should become ill, I will communicate with you via A2L about how we will make up class sessions.

Although much of the course content will be made available via A2L, it would still be a good idea to have a friend take notes for you, if possible.

Inclement Weather

If on a class meeting day MDC closes due to inclement weather, I reserve the right to move the lessons and, where possible, class activities for the week to A2L (asynchronous format). This will help to ensure that we stay on target in the course.

This syllabus is for information only and remains the property of the respective professor. This syllabus is prepared with the best information available, but the professor reserves the right to change the content and format of the course.