



McMaster Divinity  
College

# WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

## THE CONTENT AND THEMES OF THE BIBLE

### OT 1A03

McMaster Divinity College  
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Fall 2018  
Tuesday 9:00–10:50am

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

The Bible has permanently and irrevocably shaped human culture, so understanding the Bible is essential for understanding ourselves. For Christians, understanding the Bible is also essential for figuring out who God is and who we ought to be. Unfortunately, biblical illiteracy has become the norm even within the church. All too often, neither the Bible's opponents nor its defenders seem to have a clue what they are talking about. This course will survey the content of the Bible (key people, places, plot-lines, passages, etc.) and will discuss how this diverse content develops a number of key overarching themes.

### COURSE OBJECTIVES

Through their active participation in this course, students will:

#### KNOWING

- Know the names of the books of the Bible;
- Know the various canonical orderings and their communal significance;
- Know the overall shape of key biblical narratives (i.e. history of Israel; life of Jesus; emergence of early church), including major locations, characters, and events;
- Know the general shape of each biblical book, including overall structure and major themes.

#### BEING

- Assume a receptive and diligent posture towards the Bible;
- Become self-aware as a modern reader of the Bible, recognizing the antiquity of the texts;
- Dispense with over-confidence (or lack of confidence) concerning knowledge of the Bible, adopting instead an attitude of life-long learning;
- Confess the ongoing usefulness of both Old and New Testaments as Christian scripture.

## DOING

- Have the ability to quickly locate specific books in the Bible along with key passages within them;
- Have the ability to answer questions about the content of the Bible, such as might be asked during an ordination exam;
- Have the ability to draw together the entire canon when exploring matters of theological interest.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Note: Students are required to complete all of the following assignments. No unfinished assignments are permitted. *Written assignments must be uploaded to Avenue to Learn either as Word documents (.doc, .docx) or in Rich Text Format (.rtf). A penalty of 2% per day will be applied to all late assignments, including assignments submitted in incorrect file formats. Assignments cannot be submitted after December 12<sup>th</sup> without written permission from the Office of the Registrar ([thomn@mcmaster.ca](mailto:thomn@mcmaster.ca)).*

### PRIMARY READING (0%, WITH 5% PENALTY FOR NON-COMPLETION)

During the semester, each student will read through the entire Bible. The Bible reading is to be done using an easy-to-read English translation, or a translation in the student's native language if his or her English reading pace is too slow. Students can begin this reading prior to September, but it must not be commenced more than three months prior to the start of the course. The parallel texts from the ancient world will be made available on Avenue to Learn in electronic format. At the completion of the semester, each student must report whether or not the biblical and parallel readings have been read in their entirety. Failure to report completion of the assigned reading prior to **Tuesday, December 11<sup>th</sup> @ 11:59pm** will result in a final grade reduction of 5%.

### ONLINE MATERIALS & SELF-REFLECTION ESSAY (10%)

Sometime during the first half of the semester, each student will watch some brief online videos and read some brief online readings. The videos are brief (7-minute) reflections on the importance of reading biblical texts with some awareness of the ancient world in which they were shaped, and the readings are excerpts from ancient non-biblical texts. Before **Tuesday, October 9<sup>th</sup> @ 11:59pm**, students will submit a brief 1,500-word essay, reflecting in a self-critical manner on what it means to be a 21<sup>st</sup>-century person reading ancient biblical texts. Key topics include: Does it matter that there is a wide cultural and historical gap between the modern reader and the ancient texts? Can the ancient content of the Bible be accurately understood by people who interpret it within a modern context? What happens when modern readers of the Bible are unfamiliar with ancient cultures, ancient history, and ancient (non-biblical) texts? For you personally, how does knowledge/ignorance of the ancient world play a role in your understanding of the Bible? Can you give examples? Where, if anywhere, should churchgoers be getting information about the ancient world? Do the ancient worldviews of the human authors always take priority over our own modern worldviews? Are those ancient worldviews absolute and authoritative because they played a role in the composition of the Bible? Etc.

These essays need not contain bibliographies (unless unassigned sources are for some reason quoted) and explicit self-reflection is encouraged (i.e. it is fully appropriate to talk about yourself as a specific Bible

reader). *The primary function of the essay is not to reproduce what others have thought or said, but to articulate clearly what you yourself currently think. As a consequence, ignorance is acceptable, provided it is thoughtfully acknowledged.* For students who are uncertain about what constitutes a good reflective essay, a detailed grading rubric is available on Avenue to Learn.

### BIBLE CONTENT QUIZZES (10% EACH = 70% TOTAL)

Drawing upon the Bible, the supplied study tools, and the course lectures, each student will write a series of quizzes that test his or her familiarity with the content of the Bible. There will be seven quizzes overall, covering: (1) Pentateuch; (2) Historical Books; (3) Minor Prophets; (4) Major Prophets; (5) Gospels, General Epistles & Revelation; (6) Poetic Books; and (7) Acts & Pauline Epistles. The quizzes will be fifteen minutes in length and will consist primarily of short answer questions. Each quiz will be cumulative relative to the earlier quizzes, with the final questions on the quiz relating to material already covered in the earlier quizzes. Helpful maps and study notes will be posted on A2L, but students are also expected to be familiar with the relevant biblical texts.

### THEMATIC OVERVIEW (20%)

Before **Tuesday, December 11<sup>th</sup> @ 11:59pm**, each student will submit a 2,500-word essay that surveys the entire Bible, commenting on each of its major sections as well as its overall thematic unity. In between brief introductory and concluding paragraphs, the body of the essay must include seven paragraphs that summarize the distinctive emphases of each major section in the Bible (one paragraph each for the Pentateuch, Historical Books, Prophetic Books, Poetic Books, Gospels, Acts & Pauline Epistles, General Epistles & Revelation) and then three paragraphs that trace three key biblical themes across the entire Bible (one paragraph per chosen theme). The goal is to summarize the variety in the Bible by treating each section independently, but also to summarize the unity of the Bible by examining a few unifying themes.

In keeping with the grading rubric on A2L, the essay must illustrate both the diversity that characterizes different sections/books of the Bible and the unity that can be found in receiving the canon as a whole. *Please note that due to scheduling difficulties, the sections for this essay do not precisely mirror the structure and order of the class lectures and quizzes.*

## GRADING SUMMARY

|                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| Primary Reading          | 0% (with 5% penalty for non-completion) |
| Self-Reflection Essay    | 10%                                     |
| Bible Content Quizzes    | 70%                                     |
| <u>Thematic Overview</u> | <u>20%</u>                              |
| Total                    | 100%                                    |

## TEXTBOOKS

All students are required to possess a copy of the Bible in whatever language or translation is easiest for the student to read.

All students are recommended to possess a good Bible dictionary, such as:

Freedman, David Noel, ed. *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

All required textbooks for this class are available from the College's book service, READ On Bookstore, Room 145, McMaster Divinity College. Texts may be purchased on the first day of class. For advance purchase, you may contact READ On Bookstore, 5 International Blvd, Etobicoke, ON, M9W 6H3: phone 416.620.2934; fax 416.622.2308; email [books@readon.ca](mailto:books@readon.ca). Other book services may also carry the texts.

## ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

| Due Dates | Assignments                                 |
|-----------|---|
| Sep 25    | Pentateuch Quiz                             |
| Oct 9     | Self-Reflection Essay Due                   |
| Oct 16    | Historical Books Quiz                       |
| Oct 30    | Major Prophets Quiz                         |
| Nov 6     | Minor Prophets Quiz                         |
| Nov 20    | Gospels, General Epistles & Revelation Quiz |
| Dec 4     | Poetic Books Quiz                           |
| Dec 11    | Acts & Pauline Epistles Quiz                |
|           | Thematic Overview Due                       |
|           | Bible-Reading Report Due                    |

## SEMINAR SCHEDULE

| Dates<br>* = Quiz<br>▶ = Prof. Away | Seminar Sessions   | Bible Reading<br>(Word Count)       |
|-------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| Sep 11                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Welcome &amp; Introduction to the Course</li> <li>Lecture: Pentateuch (Part 1)</li> </ul> | Genesis – Exodus<br>(58,003)        |
| Sep 18                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discussion: Genesis</li> <li>Lecture: Pentateuch (Part 2)</li> </ul>                      | Leviticus – Deuteronomy<br>(66,908) |
| *Sep 25                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Quiz: Pentateuch</b></li> <li>Lecture: Historical Books (Part 1)</li> </ul>            | Joshua – 1 Samuel<br>(53,932)       |
| Oct 2                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discussion: Exodus–Ruth</li> <li>Lecture: Historical Books (Part 2)</li> </ul>            | 2 Samuel – 2 Kings<br>(56,315)      |
| Oct 9                               | Reading Week (No Class)  | 1 Chronicles – Esther<br>(57,057)   |

|         |  |   |
|---------|--|---|
| *Oct 16 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Quiz: Historical Books</b></li> <li>• Lecture: Prophetic Books (Part 1)</li> </ul>   | Isaiah – Lamentations<br>(60,934)       |
| Oct 23  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion: Samuel–Lamentations</li> <li>• Lecture: Prophetic Books (Part 2)</li> </ul>   | Ezekiel – Malachi<br>(60,756)           |
| *Oct 30 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Quiz: Major Prophets</b></li> <li>• Lecture: Gospels</li> </ul>  | Matthew – John<br>(64,767)              |
| *Nov 6  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Quiz: Minor Prophets</b></li> <li>• Lecture: General Epistles &amp; Revelation</li> </ul>  | Hebrews – Revelation<br>(22,395)        |
| ►Nov 13 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion: Matthew–John; Hebrews–Revelation</li> <li>• Lecture: Wisdom Literature</li> </ul>   | Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes<br>(27,132) |
| *Nov 20 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Quiz: Gospels, General Epistles &amp; Revelation</b></li> <li>• Lecture: Psalms &amp; Song of Solomon</li> </ul>   | Psalms, Song of Songs<br>(32,167)       |
| Nov 27  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion: Job–Song of Songs</li> <li>• Lecture: Acts (&amp; Romans?)</li> </ul>   | Acts<br>(18,450)                        |
| *Dec 4  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Quiz: Poetic Books</b></li> <li>• Lecture: Pauline Epistles</li> </ul>   | Romans – Philemon<br>(32,408)           |
| *Dec 11 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Quiz: Acts &amp; Pauline Epistles</b></li> <li>• Discussion: Acts &amp; Pauline Epistles</li> <li>• Summative Reflections</li> <li>• Course Evaluations</li> </ul> |   |

## STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC HONESTY

Academic dishonesty is a serious offence that may take any number of forms, including plagiarism, the submission of work that is not one's own or for which previous credit has been obtained, and/or unauthorized collaboration with other students. Academic dishonesty can result in severe consequences, e.g., failure of the assignment, failure of the course, a notation on one's academic transcript, and/or suspension or expulsion from the College.

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>

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

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

## 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 the following: NRSV (1989), NCV (1991), TEV/GNB/GNT (1992), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), TNIV (2005), and the Common English Bible (CEB 2011).

**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.**