



McMaster Divinity  
College

# BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS 2

NT 1A03

McMaster Divinity College  
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Winter 2020  
Wednesday 9:00–10:50am

## 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*.

## 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 readers 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

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 April 8<sup>th</sup> without written permission from the Office of the Registrar ([thomn@mcmaster.ca](mailto:thomn@mcmaster.ca)).*

### BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP REPORT (35%)

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,” people must research issues carefully in order 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). You will do this by selecting one of the following research questions, by finding scholarly sources that discuss your question, and by preparing an annotated bibliography that

records the key information you have gleaned from your sources. You will then prepare a brief concluding summary statement regarding your question in which you sketch the general contours of the debate and then articulate your own personal convictions.

The questions are as follows. If you have a strong interest in an alternative question, please contact me.

- 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?

Your annotated bibliography must list a minimum of twelve (12) scholarly sources that are 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. There is no set length for the individual annotations, nor is there a set style. I suggest treating the annotations as your own “study notes” in preparation for the concluding summary statement. You are welcome to use bullet points, and your grade will not be reduced for poor spelling or grammar unless your content becomes difficult to read and understand. The total length of your annotated bibliography is up to you, but your work must demonstrate that you have interacted carefully with your sources and taken away from them a representative sample of scholarly answers to your chosen question. You are strongly encouraged to email me a draft bibliography (without annotations) before **9:00am on January 22<sup>nd</sup>**, so that I can give early feedback regarding the suitability of your sources.

After you are finished researching your chosen question, you will produce a concluding summary statement of 1,500 words in which you supply an answer to the question. Be sure to include in your answer a representative overview of the main scholarly positions and the key interpretive decisions that

underlie their differences. Your answer should be in your own words and should not include quotations from your sources, but it must draw from your bibliography and must cite specific sources in order to show which particular sources from your bibliography lend support to your various statements. In the end, your own answer to the question should be clear, even if it remains tentative. The final bibliography and statement are due on **February 12<sup>th</sup> at 9:00am**.

### QUESTIONNAIRES (3 x 15% = 45%)

Over the course of the semester, students will read three books that explore topics of hermeneutical importance. For each book, students will post on the relevant Avenue to Learn discussion forum a reading response of *at least* 1,000 words that answers the following questions. The response does not need to be an essay. It can simply write out each question and then supply a thoughtful answer. The due dates for the completed questionnaires are **January 29<sup>th</sup> at 9:00am** (Walton, *ANE Thought*), **February 26<sup>th</sup> at 9:00am** (Walton & Sandy, *World of Scripture*), and **March 18<sup>th</sup> at 9:00am** (Westphal, *Whose Community*).

1. How has the information presented in the book broadened or deepened your understanding of the Bible's origin 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.
2. Do you strongly agree or disagree with any of the claims made by the book? Articulate some of these claims and then give specific reasons for your acceptance or rejection of them. If you don't know whether you agree or disagree, discuss whatever is preventing you from coming to a decision.
3. 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?
4. When it comes to the issues in question, would you describe your current Christian community as well-informed? What are some of the factors (both positive and negative) that make it difficult for individuals and communities of faith to (re-)assess the evidence surrounding these specific issues? How might you help your own community to become more informed and mature in its faithful reading of scripture?

Once each student's response has been posted, he or she will be able to read other student responses. This will allow for (entirely voluntary) follow-up discussion amongst students.

### POSITION PAPER (20%)

Having read Moberly's *The Bible in a Disenchanted Age*, you will write a personal position paper in which you explain, in your own words, *what the Bible is* and *how it should be approached by twenty-first century people*. Although no particular structure is prescribed for this essay, you should at some point touch on the major topics of the course. Essential topics include: the historical origins of biblical texts (and if/how these origins matter), the literary qualities of the biblical texts (and if/how they matter), the origin and function of the biblical canon(s), the role of biblical scholarship in the transmission, translation, and interpretation of the Bible, and the role(s) of human culture and the Holy Spirit in understanding the

Bible. The personal position paper should be approximately 1,500 words in length and should follow the *MDC Guidelines for Essays and Theses*. It is due on **April 8<sup>th</sup> at 9:00am**.

## GRADING SUMMARY

Biblical Scholarship Report	35%
“ANE Thought” Questionnaire	15%
“World of Scripture” Questionnaire	15%
“Whose Community” Questionnaire	15%
“Disenchanted Age” Position Paper	20%
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*. 2<sup>nd</sup> 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)

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

Moberly, R. W. L. *The Bible in a Disenchanted Age: The Enduring Possibility of Christian Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018. (196 pages)

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.

## SEMINAR SCHEDULE

Dates	Seminar Sessions	Assignments Due .docx or .rtf must be uploaded to A2L before 9:00am
Jan 8	Why Study the Bible?	
Jan 15	Biblical Scholarship	

Jan 22	OT Traditions and Texts (Part 1)	Draft Annotated Bibliography
Jan 29	OT Traditions and Texts (Part 2)	<i>ANE Thought</i> Questionnaire
Feb 5	NT Traditions and Texts (Part 1)	
Feb 12	NT Traditions and Texts (Part 2)	Biblical Scholarship Report
Feb 19	Intensive Week (No Class)	
Feb 26	Biblical Genres	<i>World of Scripture</i> Questionnaire
Mar 4	Canon Formation & Function	
Mar 11	Textual Transmission	
Mar 18	Hermeneutics (Part 1)	<i>Whose Community</i> Questionnaire
Mar 25	Hermeneutics (Part 2)	
Apr 1	Bible Translation	
Apr 8	After Understanding...What Then?	<i>Disenchanted Age</i> Position Paper

## 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*, which is available on the MDC website.

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 the property of the instructor and is prepared with currently available information. The instructor reserves the right to make changes and revisions up to and including the first day of class.**