



McMaster Divinity
College

PERSPECTIVES ON THE BIBLE

NT 3XP3 (BS/CC/CW/PS)

McMaster Divinity College
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Winter 2024
Online (Asynchronous)

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 3XP3 course is available for several 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)* or *Christian Worldview (CW)* course will be encouraged to consider different views of the Bible, to better appreciate their cultural origins and theological implications.
- ∞ Students taking this as a *Pastoral Studies (PS)* course will be encouraged to explore how the Bible functions within the Christian community, to better appreciate the practical implications of different perspectives on the Bible.

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 the final week of class without written permission from the Office of the Registrar (mdcreg@mcmaster.ca).*

LECTURE DISCUSSIONS (6 x 5% = 30%)

Over the course of the semester, you will watch the lecture videos posted for each module on Avenue to Learn (A2L). You will then post a follow-up reaction to the module's discussion forum. Your initial reaction

post must identify and discuss a specific idea from the lecture videos. You can discuss the idea itself or the relevance evidence (e.g. extending the idea, disputing the idea, offering an alternative proposal, etc.). You can discuss its status for you or for your community (e.g. reflecting on how the idea is novel or challenging or disruptive or dangerous). You can discuss 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 choose to discuss, you must offer a thoughtful, substantive, respectful reaction that can contribute to the learning of others in the class. **Initial reaction posts are due by Wednesday at 11:59pm for each of the weeks noted in the schedule below.**

You will gain access to other students' posts after you have posted your own reaction. This will allow you to read other students' posts, to reflect on them, and to offer at least **two response posts to two different initial reaction posts**. Your responses should once again focus on a specific idea from initial reaction, and should follow the same guidelines as the initial posts (i.e. focus on a specific idea, offer substantive content, be respectful, contribute to further learning). **Response posts are due by Sunday at 11:59pm for each of the weeks noted in the schedule below.**

The length of your posts is less important than their thoughtfulness. As a rule, however, your posts should be **no less than 250 words and no longer than 750 words**. If you wish to further expand a conversation, you are welcome to continue the discussion threads indefinitely by means of additional replies. However, additional follow-up posts will not be assessed.

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 post a **reading response** to an online discussion forum. The response will not be an essay; you can simply **write out each of the questions below, followed by a thoughtful answer**. The full length of your response should be **no less than 1,000 words but no longer than 1,500 words**. These **questionnaires are due at 11:59pm on Sunday 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 of the factors (positive or negative) that either encourage individuals and communities of faith to (re-)assess these issues, or that 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. 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. 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.

Once your questionnaire has been posted, you will be able to read other students' questionnaires. This will allow for (entirely voluntary) follow-up discussions. Follow-up discussions will not be assessed.

BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP REPORT (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?

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 an annotated bibliography midway through your work on the project.** This 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.

You must annotate each of your sources in order to summarize their role in your project (i.e. to explain how exactly they contribute to the scholarly conversation and why their inclusion is important). **Each annotation must be no fewer than 100 words and no more 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. You are welcome to email a draft bibliography (without annotations) so that I can give early feedback regarding the suitability of your sources, but I require at least one week to return feedback on any draft work. The final **annotated bibliography is due at 11:59pm on Sunday according to the schedule below.**

Having carefully researched your question by reading the best available biblical scholarship, you will prepare two statements. First, you will prepare **a summary statement that sketches the general contours of the scholarly discussion.** This statement 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 fair) overview of your question and the main responses that have been given to it. Second, you will prepare **a summary statement that explores the contemporary significance of the issue and articulates your own personal convictions on the matter.** 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. **Each of these statements should be approximately 1,500 words in length, for a total of approximately 3,000 words.** (For a point of comparison, this description of the final project is itself almost 1,000 words!) Third, you will once again include a bibliography, with annotations for at least twelve key sources. This can be the same as your earlier annotated bibliography (enriched with any further sources cited in your final project), but you are free to change sources or to update your annotations if you desire to do so. **The final biblical scholarship report is due at 11:59pm on Sunday according to the schedule below.**

GRADING SUMMARY

Lecture Discussions (x6)	30%
Book Questionnaires (x4)	40%
<u>Biblical Scholarship Report</u>	<u>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)

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

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

All required textbooks for this class are available from the Hurlburt Family Bookstore located beside the entrance to the Nathaniel H. Parker Memorial Chapel of McMaster Divinity College. To purchase in advance, you may contact the bookstore manager, Bernice Quek, by phone at 416.620.2934 or 416.668.3434 (mobile); or by email at books@readon.ca. The Hurlburt Family Bookstore also carries other books and merchandise and is open throughout the academic year during posted hours.

SEMINAR SCHEDULE

Week	Module	Assignments Due
Jan 8–14	Biblical Scholarship as Bible Study?	Self-Introduction
Jan 15–21	OT Traditions and Texts	Lecture Discussion
Jan 22–28		<i>ANE Thought</i> Questionnaire
Jan 29–Feb 4	NT Traditions and Texts	Lecture Discussion
Feb 5–11		<i>World of Scripture</i> Questionnaire

Feb 12–18	Biblical Genres	Lecture Discussion
Feb 19–25	Reading Week (No Class)	Draft Annotated Bibliography
Feb 26–Mar 3	Canon Formation, Transmission, and Function	Lecture Discussion
Mar 4–10		<i>Word of a Humble God</i> Questionnaire
Mar 11–17	Hermeneutics	Lecture Discussion
Mar 18–24		<i>Whose Community</i> Questionnaire
Mar 25–31	Bible Translation	Lecture Discussion
Apr 1–7	After Understanding...What Then?	Biblical Scholarship Report

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) 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. For more information, 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.

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 McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses:

<https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/resources-forms/mdc-style-guide/>

Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

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.

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: NRSV (2021), NCV (1991), TEV/GNB/GNT (1992), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), NIV (2011), and the 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.