

## Hebrew Studies 331: **The Book of Genesis: Where It All Begins**

UWM, Spring, 2010 -- BOL 281

Professor David Brusin --

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This course will study in depth one of the most interesting and influential of all Biblical books: Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible. Our approach will be literary, for the most part, but we will consider classical, medieval commentaries as well.

Modern students of the Bible see many hands involved in the formation of the Hebrew Bible. Still, I will propose that there is a distinctly unified theme that threads its way through Genesis: the creation of a nation, the beginnings of a people, and its unique understanding of its role in history and its relationship to God. We will follow this theme through the stories of Creation, the Flood, and the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, ending with the Joseph saga in the last 14 chapters of Genesis.

The Hebrew Bible is ancient literature that has greatly influenced the course of western civilization as well as some of its most important writers and thinkers for more than two millennia. It gave rise to three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The questions that emerge and with which we will struggle are just as important, therefore, as the answers we might agree upon along the way. Our central concern is not to arrive at a definitive understanding of Genesis; our main purpose is to appreciate the genius and majesty of the biblical writer(s) and of biblical themes and ideas. Our goal is to hear the voice of the biblical writers, to do our best to understand that voice, and to respond to it.

### **REQUIRED BOOKS**

Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996

Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996

[Available at the Panther Bookstore ONLY—3132 N. Downer, 967-1111—on the corner of Downer and Hampshire]

Additional assigned articles are on E-Reserve and Traditional Reserve in the library.

### **GENERAL REQUIREMENTS**

--Regular attendance is very important. Sometimes missing class is unavoidable, but if you miss more than three classes, it is your responsibility to contact me to arrange to make up a missed class (typically a two or three page paper or written version of a class activity). Absences that are not made up will affect your final grade.

--Students are expected to have read all assignments before coming to class.

--Students with special needs of any kind should contact me at the beginning of the course so appropriate accommodations can be arranged.

--Feel free to contact me, by phone or email, for any reason; if necessary, we can arrange to meet before class. I check my UWM email infrequently, so use the above address instead.

## GRADING

Attendance and Participation:	25%
Two Reflection Papers (about five pages each):	25%
Study Group Presentations, beginning <b>Week #5</b> :	25%
Final Research Paper, about 7 pages, due <b>Week #15</b> :	25%

## CLASS SCHEDULE, READING, AND ASSIGNMENTS

**Week #1 – Intro & Logistics/Reading an Ancient Text and Historical Context**  
[1/25 & 1/27] Reflection Papers, Grading, Assignments, etc.

Reading:

Robert Alter, *Genesis*, “To the Reader,” pp ix-xlvi  
Interview with James Kugel [on E-Reserve and Traditional Reserve in library]  
*Genesis*, chapter 1

**Weeks #2 & #3 – Ancient Narratives: Mythology or Science or Metaphor or ?**  
[2/1 to 2/10] Reading:

*Genesis*, chapters 2 & 3  
Sarna, Introduction and chapter I, pages 1-28  
Excerpts from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and *Enuma Elish: The Babylonian Creation Epic*  
Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *The Atrahasis Epic and its Significance for our Understanding of Genesis*, pp 1-9  
[on E-Reserve and Traditional Reserve in library]

**Week #4 – Cain and Abel: Is Cain his Brother’s Keeper?**

[2/15 & 2/17] Reading:

*Genesis*, chapter 4  
Sarna, chapter I, pages 28-32

**Week #5 – Noah and The Tower of Babel**

[2/22 & 2/24] Reading:

*Genesis*, chapters 5 to 11  
Sarna, chapter II & III

**STUDY GROUP #1 PRESENTATION—Monday, 2/22, Week #5**

**Weeks #6 & #7 & #8 – Abraham and Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac**  
[3/1 thru 3/17] Reading:

*Genesis*, chapters 12 to 23  
Sarna, chapters IV thru X

**STUDY GROUP #2 PRESENTATION—Monday, 3/8, Week #7**  
**FIRST REFLECTION PAPER DUE—Wednesday, 3/17, Week #8**

**SPRING BREAK—MARCH 22 AND 24**

*Weeks #9 & #10– Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, and Laban* [NO CLASS—Monday, April 5]

[3/29 thru 4/7]

Reading:

Genesis, chapters 24-33

Sarna, chapters XI and XII

**STUDY GROUP #3 PRESENTATION—Wednesday, 3/31, Week #9**

*Weeks #11 & #12 – Rape of Dinah and its Aftermath; Judah and Tamar*

[4/12 thru 4/21]

Reading:

Genesis, chapters 34-36; chapter 38

**SECOND REFLECTION PAPER DUE—Monday, 4/12, Week #11**

**STUDY GROUP #4 PRESENTATION—Monday, 4/19, Week #12**

*Weeks #13, #14, & #15 – The Joseph Narrative*

[4/26 thru 5/12]

Reading:

Genesis, chapters 37-50

Sarna, chapter XIII

**STUDY GROUP #5 PRESENTATION—Monday, 5/3, Week #14**

**FINAL PAPER DUE NO LATER THAN WEDNESDAY, MAY 12**

**Major/Minor in Jewish Studies** This course is part of the Jewish Studies major and minor. The major offers two tracks: Hebrew Studies and Jewish Cultural Studies (which does not require Hebrew language). With its combination of core courses and electives, the Jewish Studies program allows students to create a course of study that can focus on religion, culture, Israel, Holocaust, media, or immigration. A dynamic and innovative major, Jewish Studies prepares students to work in our multicultural world. For more information on the Jewish Studies major and minor, please the coordinator, Dr. Rachel N. Baum, [rbaum@uwm.edu](mailto:rbaum@uwm.edu); 229-5156.

**Religious Studies** If you are thinking about a major or a double major in Religious Studies, please contact either Peter Paik, Director, at [pypaik@uwm.edu](mailto:pypaik@uwm.edu) or Dr. Judith Beall, Associate Director, at [jbeall@uwm.edu](mailto:jbeall@uwm.edu).