THE 2031 –Myth and History in the Bible
Saint Joseph’s University / Fall 2007
Mon. and Wed.: 4:00-5:15 p.m.
Course website on Blackboard

Professor
Dr. Bruce Wells / Bellarmine 208 / phone: 610-660-1399 / bwells@sju.edu
- Office hours: Monday and Wednesday 11:00 – 11:50 / 2:45 – 3:45
- Please feel free to come and see me. If the office hours do not work for you, let me know and we can schedule an appointment. I will be happy to make time for you, if you should have questions or concerns that you would like to talk about in person.

Textbooks
- A Bible of your choice
- THE 2031 Course Pack – available at the university press on City Avenue

Course Description
This course examines a range of narratives from the Bible and considers how they functioned in the ancient communities from which they came. It looks at the role of myth and the nature of history writing in the ancient world and explores ways to identify both genres in biblical texts. It also examines current debates over what should count as history in the Bible and the impact of archaeological and extra-biblical literary evidence on these debates. The course will focus primarily on narratives from the Hebrew Bible (e.g., creation myths, ancestral and royal legends, political-historical narratives), though some stories from the New Testament may be considered as well.

Course Objectives
- To become familiar with the features of myth and the features of history writing as these genres were used in the ancient Near East (primary assessments: in-class performance and midterm exam)
- To engage the major viewpoints of current scholarship on both the biblical and the non-biblical texts discussed in the course (primary assessments: essays and final exam)
- To understand how historical and cultural contexts influence the creation, transmission, and written presentation of ideas (primary assessments: midterm exam and group task)
- To identify how ideas and traditions—whether religious, historical, political, or otherwise—can be developed and transformed over time (primary assessments: in-class performance and essays)
- To apply concepts and models from the study of myth and history writing to the interpretation of ancient texts, both biblical and non-biblical (primary assessments: group task and final exam)

Requirements, Assignments, and Grading
Students can earn a total of 250 points in the four different areas listed below.

In-class Performance and Quizzes (50 points / 20% of course grade). Students are expected to do the assigned reading, to make interesting and valuable contributions to whole-class discussions, to participate cooperatively in small-group discussions, and to demonstrate through their participation critical engagement with course material. Grades assigned for in-class performance will be largely subjective, based on the professor’s overall impression of a student’s efforts. In-class performance grades will be
figured out of a total of 25 points. Students should expect pop quizzes on any day that reading is due. A student’s lowest quiz grade will be dropped. If a student is absent for a quiz, that is the grade that will be dropped. No make-up quizzes will be allowed except in extraordinary circumstances. Quiz grades will be based on a total of 25 points.

**Essays (50 points / 20% of course grade).** Students will submit **two 4-5 page essays** during the semester. Each essay must relate to one of the topics covered by units 2 through 5 of the course. Students may decide the topics/units for which they write their essays. Essays must be typed, double-spaced, submitted on standard 8½ by 11 paper, and printed in a readable font style and size. E-mail submissions of essays will **not** be accepted.

Essays should focus on a particular problem or question that relates to the unit at hand. Students should look for areas where there is disagreement among scholars, where they find themselves surprised by or questioning the data, where they are perplexed by or in disagreement with scholarly analysis, or where their curiosity is piqued and they want to do further exploration. Students should focus their essays around the particular problem or question that they decide to address.

Essays will be graded by means of the following criteria. (1) **Critical Comprehension**: does the essay demonstrate clear understanding of the given topic and critical analysis of key aspects of that topic? (2) **Coherence**: does the essay have a clear thesis with logical arguments to support it? (3) **Originality**: does the essay reflect the student’s own analysis of and thinking on the topic? (4) **Mechanics**: does the essay use correct grammar and a writing style appropriate to academic work?

Each essay will be worth 25 points, and each is due by the first Monday following the conclusion of the unit for which the essay has been written. All late essays will be discounted by 2 points per calendar day.

**Group Task (50 points / 20% of course grade).** Students will be divided into groups, and each group will be assigned a particular day on which its members will be responsible for leading class discussion. Each group should focus on the topic and reading assigned for that day. On a particular group’s day, each member of the group should submit a one-page, single-spaced statement regarding what specific work he or she did to help their group prepare for its task. As a group’s members prepare for their day, they should be ready to do the following:

- answer questions from other students regarding that day’s reading;
- summarize the important points of that day’s reading;
- give the other students a reasonably challenging yet fair quiz over that day’s reading, consisting of five questions plus one bonus question;
- discuss difficult parts of the reading, bringing in supplemental information that may be helpful;
- present an issue or question related to that day’s topic for the other students to discuss in small groups;
- lead a whole-class discussion as a follow-up to the small group discussions.

**Midterm and Final Exams (100 points / 40% of course grade).** The midterm exam will be worth 50 points and will cover course content that has been important during the first several weeks of the semester. The final exam will be worth 50 points and will be primarily an essay exam focusing on students’ abilities to relate the scholarship studied in the course to the interpretation and understanding of texts.
Grading Scale
A student’s final course grade will be assigned based on the scale below. Four percentage points are assigned to each grade category (except for the category of F). I will reserve the right to figure the grades on a “curved” scale. Typically, this will occur only if it is beneficial to student grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>96-99</td>
<td>Excellent comprehension of material, insightful analysis, creative synthesis of material, frequent and highly valuable contributions in class, clarity in spoken communication, no issues with mechanics in written communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>92-95</td>
<td>Very good comprehension of material, solid analysis, good synthesis of material, frequent and valuable contributions in class, clarity in spoken communication, no major issues with mechanics in written communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>88-91</td>
<td>Adequate comprehension of material, some acceptable analysis, early stages of synthesis of material, some interesting and valuable contributions in class, clarity in spoken communication, few significant issues with mechanics in written communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>84-87</td>
<td>Difficulty in comprehension of material, little analysis, very little synthesis, infrequent contributions in class, some difficulty with clarity in spoken communication, significant problems with mechanics in written communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>80-83</td>
<td>Adequate comprehension of material, some acceptable analysis, early stages of synthesis of material, some interesting and valuable contributions in class, clarity in spoken communication, few significant issues with mechanics in written communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>76-79</td>
<td>Adequate comprehension of material, some acceptable analysis, early stages of synthesis of material, some interesting and valuable contributions in class, clarity in spoken communication, few significant issues with mechanics in written communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>72-75</td>
<td>Adequate comprehension of material, some acceptable analysis, early stages of synthesis of material, some interesting and valuable contributions in class, clarity in spoken communication, few significant issues with mechanics in written communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>68-71</td>
<td>Adequate comprehension of material, some acceptable analysis, early stages of synthesis of material, some interesting and valuable contributions in class, clarity in spoken communication, few significant issues with mechanics in written communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>64-67</td>
<td>Adequate comprehension of material, some acceptable analysis, early stages of synthesis of material, some interesting and valuable contributions in class, clarity in spoken communication, few significant issues with mechanics in written communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>60-63</td>
<td>Adequate comprehension of material, some acceptable analysis, early stages of synthesis of material, some interesting and valuable contributions in class, clarity in spoken communication, few significant issues with mechanics in written communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D-</td>
<td>56-59</td>
<td>Adequate comprehension of material, some acceptable analysis, early stages of synthesis of material, some interesting and valuable contributions in class, clarity in spoken communication, few significant issues with mechanics in written communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0-59</td>
<td>Adequate comprehension of material, some acceptable analysis, early stages of synthesis of material, some interesting and valuable contributions in class, clarity in spoken communication, few significant issues with mechanics in written communication</td>
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If a student does all of the assigned work in an adequate and average manner, that student will typically receive a grade in the C range. Grades in the B range are given for very good work. Grades in the A range are for excellent or outstanding work. Grades in the D range are for below average or poor work. More detailed descriptions of each range are below.

Students with Disabilities
For those who have a documented learning, physical, or psychological disability and who are requesting reasonable academic adjustments, you are encouraged to contact Services for Students with Disabilities (Room 113, Science Center, 610-660-1774 or 610-660-1620) early in the semester. If you suspect that you have an undiagnosed disability (learning, physical, psychological), please contact Services for Students with Disabilities to discuss this concern. You should also discuss instructional needs and accommodations with your professor as early in the semester as possible. All requests for extended-time testing must be discussed with your professor at a minimum of one week prior to the date of each exam.

Academic Honesty Policy
It is expected that students’ work in this course will be conducted in keeping with the highest degree of academic honesty. Acts of dishonesty such as (but not limited to) cheating, unauthorized collaboration, and plagiarism will not be tolerated. The “Academic Honesty Policy” of Saint Joseph’s University will be enforced. The text of the full policy can be found in the Student Handbook.

Important Notes
- Changes to the syllabus, important announcements, and other information will be sent to students via e-mail. These communications will go to students’ SJU e-mail accounts. Other e-mail accounts will not be utilized. Students may send e-mail messages from other accounts but should
check their SJU accounts on a regular basis in order to be sure they are not missing important communications regarding this course.

- All mobile phones and other electronic devices (check with professor for possible exceptions) should be turned off or placed in silent mode during class.
- If a student is absent for a class, the student should check with other students in order to obtain lecture notes or any other information that was missed. Students should not e-mail the professor, simply asking to be told what happened during that class session. Important items that require contact with the professor, such as assignments that were not turned in due to an absence, should be discussed in person if at all possible.

Course Schedule
The readings for each unit are listed for the week they are due. Unless otherwise specified, all readings are due on the Wednesday of the week for which they are assigned. Each textbook is referred to by its author’s last name. Biblical texts are referred to by their book and chapter(s). All other readings have their full bibliographic information listed below and can be found in the course pack.

**Unit 1 – The Nature of the Bible and the Nature of Myth**

This unit will introduce students to the scholarly study of the Bible and the scholarly study of myth. This will include: (1) an overview of the history of ancient Israel and Judah, the societies from which biblical traditions emerged; (2) discussion of, as far as they can be identified, the various sources or schools of thought that produced many of the biblical texts; (3) exposure to critical methodologies (e.g., source criticism, historical criticism, narrative criticism) for analyzing biblical texts; and (4) an introduction to what scholars mean by the term “myth” and the problem of defining the genre with precision.

**Week 1**
“Questions Readers Ask about the Bible” in S. L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible* (4th ed.; Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield, 1997), 1-33 [CP 3-35]

**Week 2**


**Unit 2 – Mesopotamian and Syrian Myths**

This unit will consider narratives from ancient Near Eastern societies other than Israel and Judah. These narratives are important for understanding the different types of myths that characterized much of ancient Near Eastern literature. They also reveal ways of perceiving the world that prevailed throughout the region.

**Week 3**
Batto 1-40

Dalley 39-99 (Gilgamesh tablets I-IX)

**Week 4**
Dalley 99-135 (Gilgamesh tablets X-XII) and 203-221 (Anzu tablets I-III)

**Unit 3 – Primeval Legends**

This unit will explore stories of the world’s remotest past, primarily the so-called creation and flood myths. It will compare the biblical material with that of Mesopotamia and attempt to identify the mythopoeic nature of each, as well as the service these stories performed for their respective societies.

**Week 5 essays for Unit 2** (due Monday of this week)

- Genesis 1-4 / Batto 41-72  
- Dalley 228-277 (Epic of Creation tablets I-VII)

**Week 6**

- Genesis 5-9 / Batto 73-101  
- Dalley 1-38 (Atrahasis tablets I-III)

**Unit 4 – Epic Narratives**

This unit will look at epic tales that describe how the “people of Israel” made their way to the land of Canaan/Palestine, entered it, and settled it. It is with these stories that some scholars believe we begin to see some glimpses of history in biblical texts, particularly with the description in the book of Judges of a decentralized, loosely knit federation of tribal clans. The unit will also seek to connect themes from these biblical stories to those found within other ancient Near Eastern literature.

**Week 8 essays for Unit 3** (due Monday of this week)

- Exodus 1-15 / Joshua 1-8  
- Batto 102-152  
- Dalley 154-162 (Descent of Ishtar)

**Week 9**

- Joshua 9-11 / Judges 1-5, 13-16  
- Dalley 163-177 (Nergal and Ereshkigal)


**Unit 5 – Political Narratives**

This unit will look at narratives regarding the kings David and Solomon and the so-called United Monarchy. It will also discuss recent work by both archaeologists and historians regarding the historical value of these narratives. While some of these texts have been said to be the first example of history writing in ancient Israel and Judah, they differ substantially from the modern notion of history writing.

Week 10 **essays for Unit 4** (due Monday of this week)

1 Samuel 16-31 / 2 Samuel 1-7  

[Group F on Wed. of this week]


Week 11 2 Samuel 9-20 / 1 Kings 1-10  

[Group G on Wed. of this week]

“King David, Serial Killer” in B. Halpern, *David’s Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 73-103 [CP 144-158]

**Unit 6 – Myth, History, and Belief**

This unit will explore how both mythological and historical perspectives shape and interact with belief, particularly religious belief. It will consider how this dynamic may have functioned in the ancient world and whether such study sheds light on similar dynamics today.

Week 12 **essays for Unit 5** (due Monday of this week)

Leeming, 3-25  

[Group H on Wed. of this week]


Week 13 Leeming, 27-65

Week 14 Leeming, 67-105

Week 15 Leeming, 107-162  

[Group I on Wed. of this week]

Week 16 Review for Final Exam

**Final Exam:** Wednesday, December 12, 4:15 p.m.