

B 492 – HEBREW BIBLE AND THE IMPERIAL IMAGINATION

COURSE OVERVIEW

FALL 2022

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores the nexus between empire, religion and political discourse. It includes attention to how the Hebrew Bible has featured in the imperial imagination, particularly in the modern period. It also includes a survey of how the Hebrew Bible itself depicts and imagines empire. Finally, it explores select connections of the Hebrew Bible and empire in the Bible's reception history, e.g. in novels, poetry, and music. Course sessions will examine a broad range of texts from Exodus, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Ruth, Jonah, Esther, and Ezra-Nehemiah.

COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this course participants will be able to:

1. Understand the imperial histories and context that stand behind the Hebrew Bible
2. Analyze interpretations of texts in their imperial contexts and the ways they have been used imperially throughout history.
3. Evaluate, using postcolonial studies, imperializing tendencies in the modern world that reflect, resemble or resonate with ideas and practices in biblical texts
4. Produce engaged critiques of biblical passages using postcolonial studies and other critical analyses

COURSE PROCESS

This course examines how imperial thinking saturates the Hebrew Bible. As a collection of texts set against the background of imperial aggression, the Hebrew Bible captures the logic of empire as part of the attempt to engage these structured forms of oppression in order to be rid of them. What appears as anti-imperial position in fact seems more like opposition to specific historical empires rather than the conception of empire. Biblical texts appear to mimic the tendencies of empire as a means of confronting these empires in a “fight fire with fire” approach. The course searches for those moments in the Hebrew Bible where a deep yearning for freedom from the injustices of empire are evident that can form the basis for the development of a liberative theology. In addition, time will be spent in the course to identify the ways biblical texts collude with imperial logic that leads to the maintenance of structured oppressions in various forms.

The modern period forms another focus of the course. Imperializing tendencies in the Hebrew Bible may have inspired modern imperial practices as seen largely through European nations and their geographical expansions that began in the 16th century. While the form of these geographical expansions has ceased, the logic and will that underlie them persists in various forms today. The ways in which biblical texts are easily conscripted into the modern will to empire whether in the form of development, military protection, history as a discipline, or utopia discourses all form a part of the analytical focus of the course.

Participants will come away from the course with the critical insight to evaluate theological discourse focused upon true liberation. Interrogating theological and biblical interpretation for their collusion with structured forms of oppression equips participants to lead their communities in more just and equitable ways. As a theological resource, the Hebrew Bible

offers how ancient people thought of divine power in relation to earthly power. This relationship exists at several layers of texts that will be engaged using different interpretative approaches. The exegetical work of the course calls upon participants to evaluate how these texts and their theological content can serve as sources for the development of a more just world. As such participants, will engage in the type of readings of biblical and contemporary texts in order to evaluate and critique these interpretations.

COURSE ACTIVITIES

The course will operate as a seminar in mixed format. The bulk of course sessions will take place in person for up to 2 hours. Other course sessions will be conducted featuring video conferencing technology for around 90 minutes. Participants will also engage course content in a self-directed format.

On a weekly basis, participants will submit evidence of their observation of the relationship between power and transcendence or divinity. While overt theological content may not be present in every aspect of contemporary life, belief in transcendental forces may take the place of theological constructs. These observations of the relationship will draw upon contemporary events, popular culture, and other media. Participants will work in pairs to present these observations that will reflect themes and issues explored in the course material for that week. At the end of the first unit of the course, participant will produce an evaluative paper that assess how they regard the Hebrew Bible's relationship with empire. This first unit lays out several key theories, concepts, and historical foundation that will provide participants with the necessary resources to develop their paper. Participants will present a course project developed over the course of the final third of the semester. Their project will be based upon a class presentation. The focus of the presentation will be the material covered in the second unit of the course. The work from the class presentation will be turned into a draft of their project to be presented during the scheduled workshop session. The final project will be completed based upon feedback from the session.

REQUIRED TEXTS

1. Ghandi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Second Edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
2. Heinrichs, Steve. *Unsettling the Word: Biblical Experiments in Decolonization*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010.
3. Purdue, Leo and Carter, Warren. *Israel and Empire: A Postcolonial History of Israel and Early Judaism*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

THE FIRST CLASS SESSION

The first class session covers an overview of imperial history of the Hebrew Bible. The succession of empires that exerted their influence upon the ancient Palestine feature in various ways in the Hebrew Bible. Capturing the basic historical details will provide participants with the insight to evaluate how the Hebrew Bible positions itself and how it has been read as leaning towards justice. The question of what types of reading approaches are necessary to read these texts will also be looked. That is to say are the texts inherently liberative or are they simply read that way. The following readings will be required in preparation for the first class:

Perdue and Carter, *Israel and Empire*, 37-58
Heinrichs, *Unsettling the Word*, ix-xvi