Text and Context: Biblical and Rabbinic Periods

CG HIST 541 Fall 2013-2014

Course Description and Requirements

This course Text and Context: Biblical and Rabbinic Periods is a course with multiple purposes. First of all it is intended to introduce the student to these two periods of Jewish history and to also introduce the study of some of the most formative of classical Jewish texts. There is no prior background required for this course. The only requirement is that one is a graduate student (or an advanced undergraduate). What this means is that this is an introductory course taught at the graduate level. We will be concerned not only with the historical narratives that we will encounter and the content of the texts but also the context and the different strategies employed by scholars in making sense of these texts. We will be looking at the questions that scholars have posed and the kinds of answers that they have come up with. Each generation develops a new set of questions that allow us to interrogate the text anew. We will spend some time trying to understand what these questions are and the strategies and methodologies that have been utilized in finding answers to these questions. These strategies and methodologies might include archaeology, sociology, anthropology, philology, theology, comparative religion, philosophy, gender studies, history, literary analysis, etc.

This course will also be a kind of introduction to what graduate study in the field of Jewish Studies and/or religious studies can be. You will be reading a lot of texts but also reading an even larger amount of secondary studies – articles, chapters of books, etc. You will be asked not just to comment on what the person says but also what he is “doing”. What is she trying to prove? What questions is she asking? What are the central strategies she is using? We need to understand the fundamental assumptions of the different approaches and the kinds of evidence each approach brings to bear on its subject matter. We will also be peeking into the literature around Biblical and Rabbinic texts and history and looking at the scholarly discussion and controversies taking place in the academic world today. You may find that the academic discourse sometimes seems to be at odds with ways that you have thought about Torah or Mitzvot or Biblical or Rabbinic characters or other areas of your Jewish intellectual and spiritual life. In this course we will explore a variety of ways of encountering the text and the tradition including more traditional ways of experiencing Jewish texts. Hopefully, you will come away with an expansive frame of reference in which all of the approaches can be understood as complementary to each other as opposed to competing with each other.
There are no text books for the course. Your readings will either be scanned or available in Ebrary (see assignment for Lesson 1). The only book you need to purchase is The Jewish Study Bible (Oxford University Press). This is a wonderful addition to your library and has excellent commentaries on all the books of the Bible and up-to-date essays on many aspects of Biblical studies.

Each week you will be given an assigned set of readings with introductory comments and a series of directed questions related to the readings and the ongoing class discussions. This will provide the context for the discussion threads. Every student will need to post in these discussion threads. Along with posting your responses to the directed questions you should also try to enter into the conversation and respond to other students as well. No one needs to respond to all the questions or to all of the postings. One should also exercise a certain amount of discipline so that one’s postings are not overly long (or overly short).

There will be a similar set of introductions and comments related to texts from the primary sources. This will happen most weeks and your participation in this discussion is also required.

Let me now describe each of these interactive areas in more detail.

1. The Weekly Class Discussion

This is really the heart of the course. Our week will usually begin on Friday and continue to the next Thursday evening. Because the beginning of our semester coincides with the holiday of Sukkot our first lesson will take place over two weeks from September 16 - September 29. The second lesson will be short and proceed from Sept. 30 - Oct. 3 and from then on each lesson will go from Friday until the next Thursday. What all this means is that Thursday evenings (sometimes rather late) you will find some concluding reflections from me on the week’s discussion and that on Friday mornings you will see the new week’s assignment. Often the new week’s assignment will be posted even earlier. The week’s work begins with a list of assigned readings and an introduction to those readings and the issues posed for that week. Then there is a series of questions on the readings and the issues which I would like for you to consider as you do the reading. This will be found in the Discussion Board where many of these questions are reproduced and you are asked to respond to them. As you will see, at times the questions can be quite general and at other times they can be rather specific. One of the most important goals of the course is to help you learn how to read scholarly materials. You will be asked to read not just for content but to try to understand what questions the
writer is trying to answer, what issues are the most important for him or her, what kinds of claims he (or she) makes and what methods she (or he) uses to “prove” her (his) claims. You should also reflect on how successful the authors are in doing what they claim to be doing. This form of reading is not so easy to master. It takes time and work. We are all students in this class and as we engage each other in discussion, argumentation, and criticism we will all learn from each other.

It is very important that you post to the weekly discussion on a regular basis. Your responses may be either your own initial responses to the readings or critiques or reactions to other students' comments (based on your own reading of the materials). You should make sure that over a period of a few weeks you have a good balance of original responses and reactions to others. Each week there will be at least two or three overarching questions or “threads” in the discussion. You should probably try to write your own response to at least one of them and then perhaps look at what others write in the other “threads” and react to them. Each week I will try to record a video summary or “wrap-up” of many of the issues raised in the discussion areas and offer my own comments on the discussion. I will also respond from in each “thread”. You can usually expect to “see me” in the discussion at least twice a week - once after the discussion has had a chance to develop and then in the ensuing discussion.

2. Text Study

After the first week, we will begin to engage in text-study. The purpose of this exercise is to give you some practical experience of many of the methodologies we are reading about. You will see that there are lots of ways to go about the study of primary sources and that these methodological discussions have real implications for understanding and interpreting the sources of Jewish civilization. The text selections will be brief and you will be asked to respond to some questions about the text which will exemplify the particular approach we are examining..

There is a final paper which is called a Bibliographic Essay. In this paper, students choose a topic related to either the Biblical or Rabbinic period and do research on how contemporary scholars and scholarship deal with that topic. You will receive more information on that assignment in a few weeks.
During the course of the semester I hope to speak personally with each of you. I will have regular office hours and you will be able to call or SKYPE or use Google+. My email is bmesch@hebrewcollege.edu. My telephone is 617-5598613 and my SKYPE name is bmesch (as is my google+ name).

Please introduce yourself in the Student Introductions folder. I would also like for you to complete the information asked for in your profile particularly the picture which will appear whenever you post something.