

How to Teach the Hebrew Bible in a Semester

The key to teaching any course is selecting the material on which you wish to focus. No one can cover everything in the Hebrew Bible in a semester, but you can provide a substantial introduction by judicious selection. The first issue is to decide what you want to accomplish. Is the purpose of the course simply to familiarize the students with the content of the Bible? How important is historical information? Do you want to teach the students to think critically about the Bible? Is your focus on theological or historical questions, or both?

Any introductory course must impart a certain amount of information. You need to decide which biblical books are most important for the students to read to achieve your purpose in the class, and how much background information they need. At the same time, it is well to bear in mind that students who take a single course on the Hebrew Bible are not going to retain very much of the information. It is more important that they learn *how* to read the Bible, what assumptions are appropriate, and what pitfalls to beware of.

My A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: Second Edition is written from a historical-critical perspective. The Bible was written long ago and in another culture. It was not written with our immediate problems in mind. It can speak to our problems, but it does so by analogy. It is important to begin by appreciating the otherness and foreign character of the biblical worldview. For that reason, even if time is limited, I think it is important to begin by introducing the students to the ancient Near Eastern context, especially the stories or myths that form the background to so much of the Hebrew Bible. They should have heard the story of Gilgamesh, the Babylonian creation stories, and the Canaanite Baal myths. This can be done in a single class.

It is also important to confront the relation of the Bible to history. On the one hand, students often assume that whatever is narrated in the Bible is historically accurate and are shocked to discover that this is not necessarily so. This does not have to be done in a confrontational way. One needs to explain to students the nature of historical inquiry, but also the nature of biblical

narrative, which is often more like ancient myths than like modern newspaper reporting. On the other hand, it is also important to help students appreciate how deeply the Bible is rooted in history. Even when it is not factually accurate, biblical narrative is grounded in human experience, like a good novel, and this gives it a realistic quality. It is always possible to put oneself in the place of the biblical characters. Human nature has not really changed.

Finally, it is important to give students a sense of the range of material to be found in the Bible. You can't spend the whole semester on the Pentateuch. Not only are the Prophets important, but so are the Psalms and wisdom literature. It is important then to select judiciously representative samples from the different genres.

The Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible is, I hope, a readable and accessible book. No doubt, it is still too much if you have to cover the whole Hebrew Bible in a semester. I would think, however, that it is reasonable to assign a chapter for any given class. You may not even need to assign that much. In a twelve week semester, you probably have 24 class sessions, possibly 36. There are only 29 chapters in the book, and you will not want to cover everything. I would think that the first 8 chapters could be read over the first four weeks. After that, you can be more selective. Sometimes a chapter can be spread over a week.

What of the primary readings? I would not ask beginning students to read biblical books whole. (If they are up to doing that, great, but I think most are not.) Rather, have them read the chapters you will discuss in class. So for example, they might read Genesis 1–3 and a few chapters on Abraham, Exodus 3, 6, 14–15, and 19–24, and so forth. In practice, you will find that the introduction only discusses selected chapters and you can use that as a guide. The important thing is to get to know your class and get a feel for what they can handle. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Suppose one has twelve weeks to cover the material, meeting for three hours a week (either two or three classes). The first week would be devoted to introductory matters (what is the canon? who decided what is in the Bible?) and the ancient Near Eastern background. Three

more weeks might be devoted to the Pentateuch. Students should hear about the documentary hypothesis, and be aware that there are different hands in the Pentateuch, but they do not need to distinguish sources in detail. It is important to know the difference between the Priestly source and Deuteronomy, less important to be able to distinguish between the Yahwist and the Elohist. I would spend a week on Genesis (mainly Adam and Eve and Abraham), another on Exodus (the escape from Egypt and Sinai), and perhaps sample Leviticus and Deuteronomy in one week.

From the historical books, I would discuss Joshua, since it bears on the origin of Israel and is often seen as problematic nowadays. Also the story of David is important for the later tradition. I like to introduce the Prophets by discussing the stories of Elijah and Micaiah ben Imlah in 2 Kings. The latter story is especially good for presenting the problem of recognizing a true prophet. If you have only three weeks to spend on the Prophets proper, hard choices must be made. Perhaps a week on Amos and Hosea, another on First Isaiah and Jeremiah, the third on Ezekiel and Second Isaiah. Of course one also has to be selective about the passages to be discussed. Hopefully, the textbook will be helpful there. The last three weeks of the course would deal with Psalms, Proverbs and Job, Daniel and a conclusion.

Of course, any individual teacher might make a different selection. (Is Ezra more important than Daniel?) Ernest Hemingway said that the test of good writing is the amount of good stuff you can afford to leave out. So it is also with teaching the Hebrew Bible. If you have only a semester, you have to leave out a lot of good stuff.

But it is better to do a little well than to try to cram everything in. Students will not remember most of the facts they learn in a course like this. What you hope to do is make them think about the material. So I would recommend that one be very selective about the passages to discuss in class, and then try to really engage the students. I find that the most engaging parts of the Bible are those that raise ethical questions. Was Abraham right to trust the divine voice that told him to sacrifice his son? What does one make of the slaughter of the Canaanites? Is Ezekiel

misogynist? The point is not to give the students readymade answers to these questions, but rather to make them think about them. It does not matter so much how many of the books of the Bible you cover. What matters is whether you made the students think.

John J. Collins

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