Bible and Western Culture

RELG 203 | Bible and Western Culture, Winter 2021
Tuesdays and Thursdays | 11:35 -12:55, LEA 232

Instructors: Amanda Rosini: Amanda.Rosini@mcgill.ca
Daniel Fishley: Daniel.Fishley@mcgill.ca

Course Description
This course will examine how the Bible has had such a dynamic influence on Western culture, both ancient and modern. To that end, we will focus on the role that biblical themes, symbols, and characters have had on art, literature, music, film, and popular culture. We will also explore why the Bible continues to exert an enormous influence over many people's (“secular”) lives and how the Bible has been employed by ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture, especially for political ends.

The Bible, as we will discover, is used by some to oppress and by others to liberate; it is appealed to by those who fight for equality and, equally, by others who seek to maintain a system of subordination. A dynamic and complex history informs these diverse readings and interpretations. In this class, our aim will be to understand the historical and cultural contexts that led to these distinct interpretive outcomes. We will accomplish this task by being critically minded in our evaluation of the material we engage, while nonetheless being sympathetic to the individuals and circumstances that gave rise to the matter under analysis. To both challenge and be challenged by the biblical text, its key figures, its major ideas, and the central concerns it presents to its readers—this is our intention.

Learning Objectives
By the end of this course students will be able to critically evaluate the biblical text, appreciate its historical and cultural impacts, and recognize the ongoing impacts of the biblical tradition on Western thought. In pursuit of this outcome, class content and readings will be driven by three objectives: (1) to provide an introductory appreciation to the textual world of the biblical canon; this will be accomplished by (2) exploring how key biblical motifs and themes unfold and take shape historically within and upon the Western imagination; and (3) to give students the critical tools necessary to identify the continued influence of the biblical canon and its key thematic motifs in/on contemporary issues.

Assessment
Students will be tested on their ability to engage class material as follows: (a) Ten 250 word reflections that address the material presented in the weekly readings and/or other pertinent issues discussed in class; (b) an open-book mid-term exam in which short answer and short essay questions will be used to evaluate the student’s competency with said material; and (c) three learning cell assignments in which students will write on key themes and issues from the biblical text and discuss their analysis with their classmates in a Zoom online setting.

Required Texts and Videos
Students are expected to complete all required readings and visualization indicated in the syllabus before coming to class.
- All readings for the course will be uploaded to Mycourses
- A Bible, students will be required to use a study Bible such as the NRSV or any revised English Bible with Apocrypha. We will post several links to study Bibles in Mycourses.

In addition, for each class we have included a number of YouTube clips (all found in Mycourses)
that are both required and suggested for students to watch in order to help facilitate their understanding of course material.

**Evaluation**
- 10 Reading Reflections: 20% (250 words, due before midnight on the date assigned)
- Learning Cells and Discussion: 2 x 15% (#1 Feb 4; #2 March 9)
- Midterm Open-book Exam 30% (Due Friday March 12, before midnight)
- Final Learning Cell and Discussion: 20% (April 8)

**Learning Cells:** Students will be required to read specific biblical passages in light of 2-3 secondary academic sources that show diverse interpretations of said passage. Students will be given a question and asked to critically engage with both the primary and the secondary sources. Further instructions and details will be given two weeks prior to the due date of each learning cell.

**Reading Reflections:** These are meant to be informal engagements with class material. Students are expected to thoughtfully reflect upon and critically examine pertinent issues from that week’s class in their analysis.

Students are responsible for understanding and following McGill’s policy on academic honesty. *Ignorance is not an excuse.* All relevant information is available online and/or in the *Handbook of Student Rights and Responsibilities*. McGill’s rules on plagiarism and other kinds of cheating are laid out for example at www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/. Written work may be submitted in either English or French. Grammar and style will affect grades. Late work is worth less each day: A to A-, A- to B+, etc.

_________________________________________________________________________________

**Section One—Text and Context: The Hebrew Bible and its World**

Jan 7 – Class Introduction(s), Syllabus Review, Introductory Discussion

Jan 12 – Religion(s), History, and Culture

Jan 14 – The Old Testament/Hebrew Bible an Introduction to Ancient Israel

Jan 19 – The Stories of the Hebrew Bible: From Tribe to Monarchy

Jan 21 – Legal Narratives and Motifs of the Hebrew Bible

Jan 26 – Prophecy and the Exilic Period

Jan 28 – Wisdom Tradition in the Hebrew Bible

Feb 2 – Women in the Hebrew Bible

Feb 4 – Learning Cell #1 - Hebrew Bible Themes (TBD)

**Section Two—Text and Context: The New Testament and its World**

Feb 9 – The Christian Bible: Context
Feb 11 – The Christian Bible: Letters

Feb 16 – The Christian Bible: Gospels


Feb 23 – Allegory and Typology: The Church Fathers and Reading Scripture

Feb 25 – The Bible as Book, Architecture, and the Holy Roman Empire

*Study Break – No Class (March 1-5)*

Section Three—Text and Context: The Bible and Modernity

Mar 9 – Learning Cell #2 - New Testament Themes (TBD)

Mar 11 – The Road to Modernity: The Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment

Mar 16 – The Bible in Translation: Language and Culture

Mar 18 – The Bible: Gender and Sexuality

Mar 23 – The Bible: Race and Identity

Mar 25 – The Bible: Head of States and Politics

Mar 30 – The Bible: Art, Film, and Tolkien!

April 1 – The Bible: Post-colonial World

Apr 6 – The Bible: Where to Now?

Apr 8 – Last Day: Learning Cell #3 – Western Culture (TBD)