Introduction to the Bible (Fall 2013)

In this class, which is taught as a First Year Seminar, I have recently added a secondary text called Reading the Bible with the Damned. This text accents that the Bible is a counter-cultural text, which sees the world from the underside. The book spends time on the creation account, accenting the role human beings have with respect to is as servants. It also accents human activity that engages the natural world as fellow-creature, not as powerful overlords. The introduction of this text and the extension of its themes into discussion of the biblical text gave room for more conversation about the themes of sustainability.

Course Description – the Bible

As the title indicates, the content of this first required course in theology is focused in the Bible, sometimes called the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. These scriptures are the basis for any further understanding of both Christianity and Judaism. Yet they are sometimes a challenge to read because they are so ancient. In fact, the Bible is in large part the story or history of an ancient people called the Israelites (or Hebrews, or, eventually, the Jews). To come to know about Christianity requires that one learns this story.

The Israelites were a lot like any ancient people: they fought for their land, told stories about who they were as a people, including what god they worshipped, talked a lot about their ancestors, made fun of their neighbors and sometimes themselves, and so on. Any reading of the Bible needs to begin with a sketch of who these people were and how their corporate life took shape in time. We will do this by first hearing the story of their glory days—when they conquered their land and set up a kingdom with the heroic King David in charge.

But the Israelites were also different since they were haunted by the presence of a god who had chosen them for a purpose bigger than their own glory. Indeed, the god was not just theirs but the only God, who created everything, judged everyone with righteousness (including Israel), even loved everyone as much as Israel. This could not but change how this people told their stories, including of mighty David, who, the text tells us, was also a murderer and an abuser of power. Indeed, if God’s justice and love is for all, this includes not just kings and priests but also those on the social and political margins—especially those, since justice is otherwise denied them. Bob Ekblad believes the Bible is best read from their perspective. In Reading the Bible with the Damned he considers core stories of the Bible, about creation (in Genesis) and freedom from captivity (Exodus), etc. We will read these with the help of the prisoners and outsiders Ekblad calls “the damned.”

To feel the revolutionary power in the biblical text as these “outsiders” sometimes feel it is to begin to understand what it could mean to call the Bible “sacred story.” It is an ancient book, but also, as Christians and Jews believe, inspiration for today—God’s very word of justice and love. It can interrupt our treasured assumptions and change our standard patterns of living. But this word must also be discerned, and it is rightly the subject of doubt, which leads to discussion and debate. This makes it especially suitable for a seminar in which such discussion is a key part of our work together.

For Christians, the themes of love, justice and community culminate in Jesus. His story relates partly to the darker period of Israel’s history, when they were captives in Babylon, for he is a surprise messiah (i.e., the anointed one who saves his people) who suffers. We will conclude the course with different readings of the story of Jesus, as it links back to the full formation of Judaism in Babylon, but also as it comes to create a new community called Church which amalgamates Jews and Gentiles. The
New Testament ends with various pictures of this community in the “Epistles,” which we will read selectively.

**Course Description – the First Year Seminar**

Recent changes in the University’s curriculum require all entering students to participate in a three credit seminar. Its purpose is to acquaint entering students with the kind of education to which the university aspires as a Catholic and Jesuit institution. It also serves as an introduction to university life at Scranton—to help students know what is available, to encourage them to take advantage of these opportunities, and to get them talking and thinking about how they can learn best in their Scranton years. Student numbers are limited in each class section in order to facilitate seminar discussion and allow for an easy rapport between student and professor.

Since the Jesuit (or Ignatian) character of the education at Scranton is meant to be dynamic, it is best appreciated when in process. We don’t so much study about it, but study *by* it as we encounter the subject matter of various courses. Hopefully a Jesuit approach pervades the curriculum, but it makes special sense when theology is the subject matter. For instance, connections between this year’s Ignatian Values lecture by Kevin Ryan and Tina Kelly of Covenant House and our reading of the Bible will be especially transparent.

**Student Learning Objectives** *(By the end of the course, students should be able to . . .)*

- Explain how and why the Bible is sacred to Jews and Christians.
- Recall central stories of the Bible and fit them within its grand narrative.
- Explain how and why Christians believe Jesus Christ is the culmination of the biblical story.
- Engage thoughtfully in debate and discussion about the meaning of texts, especially the Bible.
- Demonstrate what theological reflection on the biblical text involves.
- Fully enter into the intellectual life of this Jesuit, Catholic university.

**Required Texts**

- The Catholic Study Bible.
- Reading the Bible with the Damned, by Bob Ekblad.
- Occasional additional reading materials posted on Angel.

**Course Requirements and Grading**

Attendance, Participation and Journal: Attendance and participation in our seminar is crucial if it is to go well. Attendance will be taken daily, and normal standards of personal engagement will be in effect; please, no tardiness, stay awake, leave only for emergencies, cell phones off, converse with the professor and fellow students openly but respectfully, etc. Students should always have completed the readings for the day before coming to class. As they read, students should jot down questions or critical observations in a sort of journal. These journals will be occasionally checked; students will be asked to draw from them in class discussions. Along with attendance, journal checks and other occasional assignments, the quality of the student’s oral participation will also factor into the participation grade which is **30% of the final grade.**

Additionally, as a First Year Seminar, the class requires attendance at certain events outside the classroom. Participation in these events, usually including a brief written reflection afterward, will be necessary to pass the official requirements of the seminar.

**Exams:** There will be two (2) exams, a midterm worth 15% and a final worth 20% (**35% total**).

**Papers:** Particularly in the First Year Seminar, writing assignments should help students learn how to write critically at the college level. Three (3) brief papers will ask students to respond to a
specific prompt or else develop some question or comment in the student’s journal more completely. Together these will count for 15% of the final grade. A larger final paper will count 20%, making the total worth of paper assignments 35%.

All student work should conform to the standards laid out in the University’s Academic Code of Honesty (see http://www.scranton.edu/academics/wml/acad-integ/).

Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE)

Students with Disabilities: In order to receive appropriate accommodations, students with disabilities must register with the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence and provide relevant and current medical documentation. Students should contact Mary Ellen Pichiarello (x4039, LSC 577) or James Muniz (x4218, LSC 580) for an appointment. For more information, visit http://www.scranton.edu/academics/ctle/disabilities/.

Writing Center: The Writing Center focuses on helping students become better writers. Consultants will work one-on-one with students to discuss students’ work and provide feedback at any stage of the writing process. Scheduling appointments early in the writing progress is encouraged. Stop by during the Writing Center’s regular hours of operation, call 570–941–6147 to schedule an appointment, or complete the “Writing Assistance Request Form” online. For more information visit http://www.scranton.edu/academics/ctle/writing/

Instructor Availability

As the instructor for your First Year Seminar, I want especially to help you enter fully into academic life at the University of Scranton. Feel free to contact me with questions or problems. I would like to get to know you and track your progress; to this end, I will arrange individual meetings twice during the term. I am glad also to talk or consult with you at any time. Drop in at #409 Loyola Science Center during office hours (Mon. & Wed. 1:00-3:00; Thurs. 4:00-5:15 p.m.), or make an appointment. Leave a message at 941-4302, or e-mail charles.pinches@scranton.edu.
The Catholic Study Bible (CSB) in our main text. Besides the Bible itself, the CSB includes introductory articles to each biblical section and book. More in-depth introductions and other “helps” are found in the “Reading Guide” (RG) section at the beginning of our text. I recommend reading these especially as we begin new sections or books of the Bible; there is also a concordance, glossary, and various maps at the back of the CSB and scholarly textual notes at the bottom of each page. All these can be helpful, especially when writing papers. Otherwise, readings from the Bible itself are listed below by book, chapter and occasionally by verse. (You can find the biblical book by looking in the CSB’s table of contents; for chapter and verse, a colon between two numbers in a biblical reference means chapter, then verse.)

We will use Bob Ekblad’s Reading the Bible with the Damned, a different kind of commentary on the text through the eyes of those on the margins of society, at various intervals of our class. Readings are listed as “Ekblad” and chapters and page numbers are included.

Occasional readings related to the themes of the First Year Seminar are (or will be) added in as they are helpful, either in handout form, or posted ANGEL.

Opening Discussions: Jesuit Education and the Bible

8/27 About Jesuit Education: In class reading from Dean Brackley, S.J.
8/29 About Reading the Bible: CSB, Reading Guide, pp. 10-29; Ekblad, Preface, (pp. xiii-xviii); Excerpts from St. Ignatius Spiritual Exercises (ANGEL)

Israel’s Rise among the Nations – Politics then (and now)

9/3 The Tribes of Israel Settle the Land: CSB, Deuteronomy 31-32; Joshua 1-6; Judges 2-5
9/5 Questions about Political Leadership: Judges 6-9, 19-21; I Samuel 1-4, 8-16

Israel’s Stories about God: The Religious Challenge of Creation, Promise and Covenant

9/17 Creation: Genesis 1-2:3; Ekblad, chap. 2 (pp. 11-24);
9/19 Trouble in the Garden: Genesis 2:4-9; Ekblad, chapter 3 (pp. 25-60)
[9/19 Ignatian Values in Action - Kevin Ryan/Tina Kelly (of Covenant House) – 7:00 PM – Byron Center; re-read Benjamin’s story, pp.72-114.]
9/26 Joseph and His Brothers: Genesis 37-45, 47:27-48, 50
10/1 Moses is called: Exodus 1-4; Ekblad chap. 5 (pp. 93-111)
10/3 Escape to the Desert: Exodus 5-18 (Paper #2 due)
10/8 Covenant between God and Israel: Exodus 19-24, 32-34
10/10 MIDTERM EXAM

FALL BREAK