AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE: A READER'S GUIDE

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Purpose: To become further acquainted with the content of the Bible as well as with the historical, literary, and religious significance of the Old and New Testaments.

Course Description:

Perhaps no book in the English language is quoted more often and understood less than the Bible. Yet no other book has exerted more influence on the course of Western civilization. From the Hellenistic age to the present day, the Bible has had a profound impact on Western literature, art, law, ethics, philosophy, science, and sense of what it means to be human and to be civilized. To understand the ancient writings that we call the Bible, then, is to understand better our own Western culture and ourselves. More importantly, though, to know the Bible is to understand more clearly the faith we proclaim and the God in whom we trust who is revealed in Jesus Christ and known by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In this course, we will survey the literature, history, and faith of the people of Israel as recorded in the Old Testament as well as the new Israel of God as described in the New Testament. We will read, summarize, and discuss selected passages of the Bible, generally in a canonical order, as we examine key elements of the narrative. Throughout our study we will give priority to the biblical text. We will also be sensitive to the overall shape of the material and what it reveals about how the church of Jesus Christ has come to view its history and itself in light of its experiences and faith. We will also have opportunities to read and consider secondary sources to broaden our understanding of central elements of the Bible's message.

Recommended Texts:

A. A reliable study bible, such as:

Coogan, Michael, et al, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, 5th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

B. A critical introduction to the Old and New Testaments, such as:

Coogan, Michael D. *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Old Testament In Its Context*. 4th edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*. 2d. ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018.

C. A general overview of the entire Bible's narratives, such as:

Rhodes, Arnold B. *The Mighty Acts of God*. Rev. Ed. by W. E. March. Louisville: Geneva Press, 2000.

D. A critical, single-volume Bible Dictionary with maps, such as:

Achtemeier, Paul J., ed. *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, 3d ed. Rev. Upd. Ed. by Mark Powell, New York: HarperOne, 2011.

As the writer of Ecclesiastes writes, of books there is no end (12:12). Certainly, when it comes to the Bible, there are more books to be read than any of us can read. Some books, however, are more beneficial than others, and some books are not worth reading. The few books recommended here are reliable and beneficial for anyone seeking to understand more about the Bible and its message. Here, too, as good as they may be, they are not of equal value.

The most important text for our course is a Bible. The best Bible is the one you read, but the Oxford Study Bible is noteworthy for both the NRSV translation and its balanced, thorough notations.

Similarly, there are a many good introductory textbooks on the Old and New Testaments, but there are also quite a few bad ones. The recommended introductions bring forth the latest in biblical scholarship without arbitrarily resolving biblical ambiguities to fit doctrinal agendas. In other words, you will find reliable guides here with Coogan and Powell who will help you think about the Bible without telling you what to think.

For a narrative overview of the biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation, it would be hard to beat Rhodes's text, which is why it is still around. Originally part of the Covenant Life Curriculum of the PC(USA) and drawn out of the Presbyterian and Reformed traditions (1964), it remains one of the most accessible and comprehensive introductions to the Bible's narratives. I recommend the newer edition.

Whatever you read in preparation for this course, please remember most importantly that there is no substitute for simply reading the Bible in pursuit of fellowship with God and neighbor.

In the following outline, I recommend that your read the recommended biblical narratives first, then respond to my questions in writing, as best you can, and then as interest and resources are available consult the introductions for the light they will add, which will help you refine and improve your understanding.

Course Outline and Exercises

I. The Old Covenant Community: Israel

A. The Promise of God to Abraham

Read: Genesis 12:1-9; 17:7-8; Acts 7:2-19.

Reflect: What three things did God promise to Abram (Abraham)?

B. The Need for God's Promise

Read: Genesis 1-11.

Reflect:

1. Genesis preserves two creation accounts. Compare Genesis 1:1-2:3 and 2:4-25. What similarities and differences do you see? What do the creation accounts reveal about the nature and work of human beings?
2. It has been said that Genesis 3 is a "mirror" in which everyone may see his or her own reflection. What do you think?
3. Genesis 4-7 shows the spread of sin and its horrible consequence. Using a concordance, read entries for the word "keeper." What kinds of things do keepers keep? To what extent did sin spread? What effect did sin have on the world?
4. As Genesis 8-11 show, the flood did not cleanse the world entirely from sin. How does sin begin again? What effect does sin have on human communities? How does sin influence vocational choices?

C. The Inauguration of God's Promise

Read: Genesis 12-50.

Reflect:

1. Genesis 12 marks a major turning point in the biblical text and in God's dealings with humanity. What is God's new initiative for saving humanity from itself? What is the basis of God's plan? Look up the word "covenant" in a concordance. Where else does the word appear in Genesis?
2. In his reflections on the story of Abraham, Martin Luther noticed a pattern in the accounts of Abraham's faithfulness and unfaithfulness. What evidence do you see of positive and negative faith? What do the different stories of Abraham's positive faith have in common?
3. The stories of the patriarchs in Genesis are ordered sequentially by generation: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel), and Joseph. How does God keep his promise to Abraham? How do the patriarchs work with and against God's promise? What adjectives would you use to describe Jacob? How did Jacob receive the name "Israel"?
4. Joseph's story explains how the family of Israel came to live in Egypt. How is God's promise "hidden" in the story of Joseph?

D. The Birth of a Promised Nation

Read: Exodus 1-15:22; 15:22-24:11.

Reflect:

1. How did the descendants of Abraham in Egypt come to be enslaved?
2. Exodus 3-4 tells how God called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. How does Moses respond to God's call? In what ways does God respond to Moses' concerns?
3. As you read the account of Moses' confrontation with the pharaoh and the series of plagues which the Lord brought upon Egypt, give close attention to 12:29-15:22 which describes the final plague and Israel's departure from Egypt. What does the Passover mean?
4. After their deliverance at the sea, the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, where the Lord and the people entered into a covenant relation. What is a covenant? What are the expectations and obligations of this Mosaic covenant?
5. The Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the Sinai desert before moving into the land of Canaan. What was the cause and nature of their wandering? How was this "mixed multitude" able to form a united national identity?

E. The Conquest and Settlement of the Promised Land

Read: Deuteronomy 29-30; Joshua 1-11, 23-24; Judges 2-3.

Reflect:

1. The Bible preserves two separate and distinct versions of the settlement of Canaan. Joshua reports that the Israelites conquered the land in swift, decisive military campaigns. Judges suggests that the 12 tribes of Israel operated independently and that settlement occurred more gradually. Once in the land of Canaan, the Israelites maintained a loose confederation of the 12 tribes for nearly 200 years. What does the book of Judges say about this period of Israel's history (cf. 2:11-23)?
2. The Israelites were not able to conquer all of Canaan. What dangers did the Philistine confederacy pose for the Hebrew people? (cf. 1 Samuel 4)

F. The Establishment of the Kingdom of Israel

Read: 1 Samuel 8-11, 15-18, 28, 31; 2 Samuel 1, 5-7, 11-12, 13-15.

Reflect:

1. The Bible presents two versions of Saul's ascent to kingship. Compare the two accounts found in 1 Sam 8-11. Who selects Saul to be Israel's first king in the first account? in the second?
2. Saul became king around 1020 BC and ruled until about 1000 BC. How does the text describe Saul's strengths and weaknesses?
3. David's rise to kingship and the unification of Israel under one king marked the beginning of Israel's "Golden Age," a period that would continue through Solomon's reign until 922 BC. As with Saul, there are at least two accounts of David's rise to power in 1 Samuel 15-17. How does God figure into these accounts?

4. In 2 Samuel 7:1-17, God makes a promise with David. What are the elements of this promise? How is the word "house" used?
5. David was largely successful in military and political matters. He also proved successful in foreign affairs. He was a failure, though, in handling his own family, as seen through his affair with Bathsheba and the revolt of his son Absalom. Why might the biblical writers have preserved these stories?
6. Solomon succeeded David but his reign was also characterized by successes and failures. Remembered most for his wisdom and monumental building projects, Solomon burdened the Israelites with taxation and forced labor. Following his reign, civil war erupted and the united kingdom split apart into two kingdoms in 922 BC. From this time onward, the Hebrews were divided into a northern kingdom called Israel and a southern kingdom called Judah.

G. The Prophetic Analyses of Israel's Kings and Kingdoms

Read: 2 Samuel 7, 11-12; 1 Kings 18; Amos 1-6; Isaiah 1-12, 28-31; Jeremiah 1-7, 31.

Reflect:

1. Israel's "Golden Age" of a united monarchy was accompanied by growing secularization. It also gave rise to a new age of prophecy. Do you think these two movements are related?
2. What roles does the prophet Nathan play in his dealings with David and Solomon (cf. 2 Sam 7, 11-12 and 1 Kings 1).
3. Look up the word "Baal" in a Bible Dictionary. What does Elijah's dual with the prophets of Baal reveal in 1 Kings 18?
4. Amos lived around 760 BC. What does his preaching reveal about Israel's situation in his day? How might Amos's preaching sound today? How might people today respond to such preaching?
5. Isaiah and Jeremiah lived in the 600s BC and also announced both judgment and hope. What do these prophets say about God? about the people of the promise?

H. The Babylonian Exile and Return

Read: Isaiah 40-45, 50-53; Ezekiel 2, 20, 33-34, 37.

Reflect:

1. Following the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in 722 BC, the southern kingdom of Judah survived until 587 BC when it fell to the Babylonians. The religious and political leaders as well as many skilled laborers were deported to Babylon where they were formed into new communities that would support the Babylonian empire. They had some autonomy within their communities but they remained captive. The Babylonian exile lasted fifty years. Stripped of their land, their temple, and their customary religious practices, the Israelites faced an enormous crisis of faith. The prophet Ezekiel and the prophet who is often

called Second Isaiah (chapter 40-55), however, announced that God had not abandoned His people or purposes.

2. In Isaiah 40-55, considerable attention is given to God's "anointed" and God's "suffering servant(s)." Using a Bible Dictionary, look up these terms and see how they are used in the Bible. What does it mean to be God's anointed? How can one person's suffering be a help for others?
3. Following the Persian conquest of Babylon, King Cyrus of Persia issued an edict of toleration in 538-7 BC, which freed the Israelites from captivity and inaugurated the restoration of their nation. Read Ezra 1:1-4; 7:27-28; 10 and Nehemiah 1-2, 8-9. Who were Ezra and Nehemiah and what roles did they play in the rebuilding of Jerusalem?
4. The book of Jonah presents a counter position to the isolationist tendencies reflected through the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. How is Jonah's mission related to the Abrahamic covenant?

I. Israel's Wisdom Traditions

Read: Proverbs 1-3, 6-8, 10, 15, 26-27; Ecclesiastes 1-3, 8-9; Job 1-7, 38, 42.
Reflect:

1. Israel's wisdom tradition seems to be nearly as old as Israel itself. Throughout her history there have been Hebrew sages who observed life carefully and sought to identify and describe timeless truths wherever they found them. What does your reading of selected chapters from Proverbs reveal about the author(s) range of interests?
2. The book we call Ecclesiastes is also known as Qoheleth. How does the "Preacher" rank human wisdom?
3. Job presents us with one of scriptures most thorough treatments of the problem of suffering. Why does Job suffer? What do Job's friends believe about the cause of his suffering?

J. The Intertestamental Period

Between the compositional periods of the Old and New Testaments, a period of roughly 400 years—some of which is reflected in Daniel and is chronicled in such deuterocanonical books as the Maccabees, the people of Israel were subjugated under the rule of the Persians, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Syrians, and the Romans. They knew only 100 years of self-autonomy under the rule of the Hasmoneans, but this time of independence was hardly a time of peace. Look at the attached appendix "Chronology" which summarizes the intertestamental period. How might this portion of Israel's history contribute to a growing interest in the coming of a Messiah and the end-time rule of God?

Four major parties in Judaism emerged during this period and are prominent throughout the New Testament period. Look at the accompanying appendix entitled "Parties in Judaism." What do these parties hold in common? At what points do they differ?

II. The New Covenant Community: The Church

A. Foundations of the Christian Faith

1. Read Galatians 1:3-4; Romans 1:1-4; 10:8b-9; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25; 15:3-7; and 1 Timothy 3:16. What do these early creedal statements of the Christian faith affirm?
2. Read Acts 2:22-39; 3:13-26; 10:36-43. What do these texts say about the church's early proclamation (*kerygma*)? What is the "good news"?
3. Read Colossians 1:15-20; Philippians 2:6-11; 1 Peter 1:3-5; 2:22-25a; 3:18-22.

B. Collections of Jesus Material

1. Jesus told stories like this: Matthew 13:1-52.
2. Jesus taught like this: Matthew 5-7.
3. Jesus did things like this: Matthew 8:1-17, 23-24; 9:1-8, 18-26.
4. Jesus sometimes spoke like this: Matthew 23:1-33.
5. Jesus envisioned things like this: Mark 13:5-37.
6. Jesus was treated like this: Mark 14:12-16:8.
7. Jesus was described like this: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We will spend a good portion of our class time seeking to clarify the distinctive contributions of each gospel. Please strive to be familiar with the life of Jesus as presented in the Gospels.

C. The Church Grows

1. The Book of Acts is often called the Acts of the Apostles. It is the sequel of Luke's Gospel and is written by the same author (see the opening of both books). In both works, Luke stresses that the Gospel is for all people. As you read Acts 1-12, consider the growth of the church from Jerusalem into all the world. Who does Luke identify as the main leader or initiator of events in the early church?
2. Luke asserts that unity was a chief characteristic of the early church, but there were also major controversies. Read Acts 15. What was the basis of this early controversy in the church? How did the church resolve this controversy? What criteria did they apply? What significance might this process have for individual Christians today? For the Church?
3. As the Book of Acts unfolds, Paul becomes increasingly prominent as an effective evangelist. Read the accounts of any one or all three of Paul's missionary journeys recorded by Luke (13:1-14:28; 15:36-18:17; 18:23-21-14). How does Paul share the gospel?

D. The Church as Community

1. The idea of "community" is rooted in relationships. The church grew because of its relation to God and the relations God enabled among its members. During the early years of the church's existence, the Christian faith was transmitted entirely by personal testimony. Persons became Christians because of the impressions they gained about Jesus through direct contact with people who were followers of Jesus. Similarly, they continued to be nurtured and grew in faithfulness through the direct support and encouragement of fellow Christians. But as the church grew and

Christians moved about, support for one another was often expressed through letters. Read First Thessalonians. Why does Paul write this letter? What does this letter reveal about Paul's relation with the Christians in Thessalonica? What does it show about the relation between the Thessalonians and Christians in other places?

2. Sometimes, Christians ignored their connectedness with Christians in other congregations and places. Read 1 Corinthians 1-3, 12-14. What kinds of problems are the Corinthian Christians facing? What is Paul's response? How are Christians related?
3. Sometimes, Christians became confused about the truth of the gospel and grave conflicts erupted. Read Galatians 1:1-3:5. What caused divisiveness in Galatia? What effect do you think Paul's letter had on the Galatians? What does the text say about the true gospel? How did the Galatian congregation begin, and how did their community grow?
4. Nevertheless, the Christian community continued to grow along with the faithfulness of the "saints." Read Romans 1, 3, 5-6, 8, and 12. Look up the word "saint" in a Bible dictionary. What does it mean? What are the characteristics of saints? What is the relation between faithfulness and the life of the Christian community? Is it possible to be an independent Christian?
5. Read Ephesians 1-4:16. What is said about the church as a covenantal community here? How does it exist?
6. Read James 1, 2 Peter 3, and 1 John. What do these letters reveal about the significance of Jesus Christ and the implications of faith in him?

E. The Church Proclaims Jesus the Christ

1. The Gospels did not reach the form in which we have them until at least 35 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Many early Christians were anticipating Christ's return in the very near future. Evidently there seemed little need to preserve orderly accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in narrative form. But as the church grew and the interval between Christ's first and second coming lengthened, the church sought to preserve testimonies of significant events in Jesus' ministry in order to teach the next generation of Christians about Jesus. Read Mark 1 and 8, and review Mark 14-16. How does Mark identify Jesus in 1:1? How does Peter identify Jesus in 8:29? How does the centurion identify Jesus in 15:39? What enables the Gentile centurion to see who Jesus is?
2. Matthew is closest to Mark in content, but Matthew stresses a different aspect of Jesus' identity and significance. Read Matthew 1. Why would Matthew begin an account of Jesus in this way? Review Matthew 5:17-48. How many Old Testament quotes or allusions do you find here? What significance might this have for Matthew and his community? Matthew is the only gospel to use the word "church" (Greek, *ekklesia*) and shows a strong concern for the nature and function of the church. How might 25:31-46 be informative of Matthew's view of the church.
3. The Gospel according to Luke is the first of two volumes by the same author, the second volume being Acts. Luke shows a particular interest in the relevance of Christ for all people, for Jesus is the savior of all nations.

Read Luke 7-8 10, 14-15, 19. What kinds of things does Luke assert about the identity and purpose of the Christian community?

4. John is not a "Synoptic Gospel." Look up the word "synoptic" in a Bible dictionary. Why are Matthew, Mark, and Luke called "Synoptic Gospels"? John is distinctively different. Read John 1. This gospel begins by asserting that Jesus is the personification of the infinite wisdom of God. Why do you suppose John does not give an account of Jesus' birth? Read John 15. What kinds of things does this passage reflect about the community of John? Read 19-21. What is said about Christ and the Christian community here?

*Note: Because our time together will be limited, I will assume that everyone has a basic familiarity with the life of Jesus as presented in the Gospels. We will engage these and other texts in our study in order to discern better the distinctive characteristics of each Gospel, a task that is easier for those who are familiar with the biblical texts.

F. The Church Hopes

The New Testament, indeed the whole Bible, ends with a vision of future events in the coming Day of the Lord. Read Revelation 19-22. For what are Christians awaiting? What is the basis of this hope? What are the characteristics of the hope described here? What difference does this hope make for living today?