Introduction to the Torah and the Hebrew Bible

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This lecture series will provide an introduction to key texts within the Pentateuch (Torah) with the goal of understanding these writings in their original contexts - historical, cultural, and religious. While the focus will be primarily on the Torah, this series will also survey different biblical genres outside of the Pentateuch (narrative, law, prophecy, and wisdom literature), to apprehend the wider scriptural canon, and to highlight the breadth of the Hebrew corpus. The course will emphasise key themes such as lineage and divine covenant, polytheism and monotheism, representations of gender and biblical “patriarchy,” and biblical notions of purity and morality.

Course outline:

Class 1: Introduction and overview

What is Torah? How does it fit into the Hebrew Bible?
How to read the Bible as an historian
- Creation and flood myths in the Hebrew Bible and the broader ancient world
Suggested readings: Genesis 1-3, short selections from the Babylonian Enuma Elish, Genesis 8-9

Class 2: Genesis – YHWH, Covenant, and Biblical Patriarchy
- Who is YHWH and what is his relationship with his people Israel?
- How can we understand the biblical notion of covenant within an ancient Near Eastern perspective? How might Israel’s relationship with their god be unique?
- What was the role of women in these patriarchal narratives of lineage? How can we understand biblical patriarchy in its original context?
Suggested readings: Patriarchal narratives of Genesis (selections from chs. 12-50)

Class 3: Moses – Exodus and Deuteronomy
- The centrality of the Egypt narrative as a foundational myth for ancient Israel
  o Centrality of Moses in broader Torah, claims of Mosaic authorship
- Moses as a hero type in the Bible - Moses as leader. In what ways is he successful? In what ways does he fall short?
- Deuteronomic notion of covenant as justification for theodicy (divine justice)
Suggested readings: selections from Exodus and Deuteronomy

Class 4: Law, Cultic Religion, and the Priesthood
- How do priestly writings depict Israelite religion? What were the official beliefs and practices?
- How does ritual play a significant component of daily life for Israelites?
- How do these standards for “biblical religion” compare with other biblical sources? Archaeological records? How monotheistic was ancient Israel?
Suggested readings: selections from Leviticus, Numbers 19
Class 5: Prophetic Literature in the Canon
- Distinction between priests and prophets – what is a prophet?
- Women as prophetesses (i.e., Deborah, Miriam, Huldah)
  - Was this a more gender-balanced role? Or limited to men?
- How do prophets draw from Pentateuchal motifs, traditions, and themes? How is their view of covenant and God’s judgement shaped by (and divergent from) Torah?
Suggested readings: passages from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel

Class 6: Prayer and Wisdom Texts
- The genre of ancient wisdom literature
- Torah as a source of wisdom, gift for God’s people
- Evolving views of theodicy in Job and Ecclesiastes
Suggested readings: selected passages from Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job