

RELS 310: SACRED TEXTS
“Creation and Cosmos in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East”
COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON
FALL 2023

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course we examine how those peoples of the ancient Near East (e.g., Egyptians, Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Canaanites, and Israelites) explained the origins of the gods (theogony), the cosmos (cosmogony), and the structure of their world (cosmology) - in short, ancient Near Eastern creation mythologies, although these deal with much more than creation itself. Our examination of these ancient cosmic conceptions will proceed initially through a reading and analysis of primary texts and related images, with some readings on their interpretation: Pyramid, Coffin and other texts from ancient Egypt, myths from Mesopotamia (e.g., Enuma Elish, Gilgamesh, Adapa) and Canaan (Baal cycle), and biblical narrative (primarily Genesis), as well as other biblical descriptions of or allusions to the creation event or process (Psalms, Isaiah, and Job). Following our consideration of these texts, we then move more seriously into matters of interpretation (with student presentations) and particular problems or issues that have plagued the scholarly examination of these traditions (e.g., the socio-political function of creation myths; the precise relationship between the ancient biblical cosmology and those of Israel's neighbors; what type of interpretive light do these non-biblical texts shed on the Bible?; addressing the timeless interpretive conundrums in the Eden narrative; does the Hebrew text itself present a consistent view of the creative event/process and Yahweh's role in it?). Overall, you will acquire a good grasp of the various ideas and images regarding creation in the ancient Near East, as well as the extent to which the Hebrew Bible itself is very much a product of its place and time.

REQUIRED TEXTS

- 1) Stephanie Dalley (trans.), *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*. Revised edition (Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 2) Andrew George (trans.), *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Penguin Books, 1999; reprinted with minor revisions in 2003). You need the 2003 edition.
- 3) Ellen A. Robbins, *The Storyteller and the Garden of Eden* (Pickwick Publications, 2012).
- 4) Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. I recommend one of the following: Jewish Publication Society's *TANAKH: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Hebrew Text* (Jewish Publication Society, 1985; 2d ed. 1999). This translation is also available in a study edition (*The Jewish Study Bible*, edited by Adele Berlin and Mark Zvi Brettler, 2d edition. Oxford University Press, 2014). *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, edited by Michael Coogan et al. (Oxford University Press; now in a fully revised 5th edition, 2018, but I will accept earlier editions). Other acceptable translations include *The New American Bible, Revised Edition* (2011) and *The New International Version* (2011 updated edition).

4) Readings on Oaks are accessed via your MyCharleston account. These are grouped into two sections. Part I (nos. 1-32, listed in the schedule below) contains syllabus readings for the course up to the time of presentations, while Part II (see list in separate handout) consists of readings for critical analysis and class discussion in oral presentations. In addition to the latter, we will also be reading the Robbins book (chapters 3-8 for presentations).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1) *Mid-term Exam (20%)*. This exam (covering material on Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Canaan) will contain passages from primary sources (identify the text and comment on its significance), and essay questions (answering two out of three or four). A study guide will be distributed prior to the exam. It is imperative that you notify me **in advance** if you are unable to take the exam. Call me at my office (953-4996) and leave a message (if I don't answer) regarding the reason for your absence. Make-up exams, permitted only with a valid excuse, may be of a greater degree of difficulty than those given in class.

2) *Oral Presentation (20%)*. You will be given time to peruse the chapters in Robbins and readings on Oaks (Part II), and choose from among these for your presentation. If you fail to choose a reading by the deadline, I will assign one to you. Each presentation will focus on one of these readings (i.e., what is the argument, how does the author present his/her thesis, what are its various components and strengths/weaknesses, etc.). A handout with guidelines for presentations will be provided, as well as a sample outline for reference. All presentations must be accompanied by an outline to be handed out to the entire class. I will be happy to go over your outline (or the material in general) if you get one to me in good time (**not** the day before the presentation). Following each presentation, I will call on a designated student respondent for that particular reading and then open the class to questions/comments to initiate general discussion. If you miss your presentation without an incredibly good excuse (dead or dying), you will receive a failing grade on it. **All students are required to read the material for each presentation and submit informed and intelligent questions (via email) for class discussion (due the night before that class).**

3) *Presentation Paper (20%)*. An expanded write-up and revision of your oral presentation, taking into account the comments and questions of other students and the professor. These will be due **one week after** the date of your presentation. Those presenting at the end of term will be given additional time.

4) *Take-home cumulative Final (25%)*. This essay exam may encompass anything read or discussed over the course of the term, including material covered in presentations. You must turn in this exam to pass the course.

5) *Attendance/Participation (15%)*. Students are required to attend class and participate in discussions. You are permitted a total of **THREE** absences, for whatever reason, over the course of the term. Any number greater than this will affect your final grade for the course. Eight or more absences will result in automatic withdrawal from the course. As for reading assignments and participation in class, **I will assume that you have done the required readings before coming to class** and will not summarize or retell the narratives. You should expect to be called on to respond to questions about the readings. In addition, I will give brief writing assignments (or unannounced quizzes if students are not keeping up with the assigned material); these will also count in my determination of your grade.

GENERAL EDUCATION STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

In dealing with concepts and images of creation in the ancient Near East, the course addresses the following

two GenEd learning outcomes: (1) Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted, or valued in various expressions of human culture; and (2) Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the humanities area under study and interpret that material in writing assignments.

DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION

If you have a documented disability and have been approved to receive accommodations through the Center for Disability Services/SNAP (Students Needing Access Parity), please come and discuss this with me as soon as possible during my office hours (or by appointment). Students approved for accommodations are responsible for notifying me at least one week before accommodation is needed.

TECHNOLOGY POLICY

Use of laptops or other electronic equipment is not permitted in the classroom. You are required to print out and have in hand the relevant assigned reading(s) from Oaks for each class. I will announce beforehand (in class or via email) what readings you should bring to class for discussion. Smart phone use (texting, etc.) is strictly prohibited; all phones should be set on silent (not vibrate) or turned off and *not on your desk or otherwise in view*. If I see you continually staring down and smiling, I will assume you have a phone.

HONOR CODE POLICY

Please read this sheet carefully, sign/date it, and return it to me in class no later than August 29.

GRADING SCALE: Final grades are determined in accordance with the following scale:

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|------------|------------|
| A = 100-94 | C = 75-73 |
| A- = 93-90 | C- = 72-70 |
| B+ = 89-86 | D+ = 69-66 |
| B = 85-83 | D = 65-62 |
| B- = 82-80 | D- = 61-59 |
| C+ = 79-76 | F = 58- |

LECTURE SCHEDULE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

Dates are subject to revision based on enrollment after withdrawal date. Please bring all relevant materials (along with engaged cerebral matter) to class!

I. Introduction: The Ancient Near East and Myth (August 20-27)

Readings:

- L. Honko, “The Problem of Defining Myth” (Oaks #1)
- R. McCutcheon, “Myth” (Oaks #1a)
- Liverani, “The Ancient Near East as a Historical Problem” and “The Geography of the Ancient Near East” in Oaks #2 (see also maps and chronologies in Oaks sub “Handouts”)

II. Creation and the Cosmos in Ancient Egypt (Aug. 29–Sept. 10)

Primary Texts:

- J. Allen, “The Egyptian Universe” and “The Elements of Creation” (Oaks #3)
“The Process of Creation” and “The Means of Creation” (3a)
- E. Wente, “The Book of the Heavenly Cow” (#4)

- M. Lichtheim, "The Memphite Theology" (Shabaka Stone) (#5)
 Three Egyptian texts (Merikare; Coffin Text, spell 1130; and Book of the Dead, chap. 175) (#6)
 R. Parkinson, "The King" (#7)

Discussion:

- E. Hornung, "Origins" (#8)
 C. Zivie-Coche, "Cosmogonies, Creation and Time" (#9)
 G. Pinch, "Mythical Time Lines" (#10)

III. Creation and the Cosmos in Ancient Mesopotamia (Sept. 12-26)

Primary Texts:

- "Eridu Genesis" (Oaks #11) = ETCSL text 1.7.4 ("The Flood Story")
 "Enki and Ninmah" (#12) = ETCSL text 1.1.2
 "Atrahasis" (Dalley, *Myths*, 1-38, 338)
 "The Epic of Gilgamesh" (Standard Babylonian version) – George, *Gilgamesh*, pp.1-100
 "Enumah Elish" (Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, pp. 228-77; see also Lambert discussion/translation of this text in Oaks #17, pp. 17-26, 37-59)
 Lambert, "A Unilingual/Bilingual Account of Creation" and "The Founding of Eridu" (Oaks #13)
 "Adapa" (Dalley, 182-88; Izre'el translation and comments in Oaks #14)
 "Theogony of Dunnu" (Dalley, 278-81, and Lambert, "The Theogony of Dunnu" in Oaks #15; also *COS* 1:402-403)

Discussion:

- Dalley, *Myths*, "Introduction," pp. xv-xix.
 George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, "Introduction," pp. xii-lii
 J. Bottero, "Religious Representations" (Oaks #16a-b, esp. pp. 77-90)
 W. G. Lambert, "Mesopotamian Creation Stories" (#17)
 W. Horowitz, "Cosmic Geography in Accounts of Creation" (#18)
 A. Seri, "The Role of Creation in Enūma eliš" (#19)
 T. Abusch, "The Development and Meaning of the Epic of Gilgamesh: An Interpretive Essay" (#20)

IV. Canaanite Mythology (Oct. 1-8)

"Our King is Baal the Conqueror!": Baal's Defeat of Sea and Death

Primary Texts:

- M. Coogan and M. Smith, "Baal" (#21a-b; with Introduction to the text)
 W. Pitard, "The Binding of Yamm" (#22)

Discussion:

- Coogan and Smith, "Introduction" (to Ugarit literature) (#23)
 J. Day, "Yahweh's Appropriation of Baal Imagery" (#24)

****MID-TERM EXAM - Oct. 10****

****FALL BREAK - October 15****

V. Creation and Cosmos in Genesis and Beyond (Oct. 17-29)

Primary Texts (for Genesis 2-3, see Robbins, chap. 2 and translation on pp. 157-162):

Genesis 1-11 (for chapters 2-3, compare Psalm 82)

Isaiah 40:12-23

Job 22:12-14

Proverbs 8:22-31

Psalms 24:1-2, 104:2-9, and 115:16-17

Exodus 20:4

Isaiah 24:17-18

Job 9:4-13, 26:5-14, and chaps. 38-41

Discussion:

R. Oden, "Interpreting Biblical Myths" (#25)

Habel, "Discovering Literary Sources" (#26)

M. Smith, "The First Day: Questions about Genesis 1" (#27)

Firmage, "Genesis 1 and the Priestly Agenda" (#28)

W. R. Garr, "The Nouns דְמוּת [*demut*, "image"] and צֶלֶם [*selem*, "likeness"]" (#29 - a selection of passages)

M. Smith, "Is Genesis 1 a Creation Myth? Yes and No" (#30)

P. Tribble, "Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 Reread" and "Not a Jot, Not a Tittle: Genesis 2-3 after Twenty Years" (#31)

Chapman, "The Breath of Life: Speech, Gender and Authority in the Garden of Eden" (#32)

VI. Creation and Exodus: Yahweh's Battle with Yam/Sea (*Chaoskampf*) (Oct. 31)

Primary Texts:

Isaiah 27:1; 43:16-21; 44:24-28; and 51:9-16

Psalms 74:12-17; 77:11-20; 89:9-14,25; 93:1-5; 104:1-9; and 106:6-12

Exodus 15

Job (review passages listed above)

Discussion:

Day, "Yahweh's Appropriation" (pp. 98-107)

VII. Class Presentations (ca. November 5-21, subject to change).

A separate sheet with the presentation schedule will be distributed in class after you have chosen your readings.

****TAKE-HOME FINAL EXAM - Due Monday, December 9****