

Introduction to the Bible / Old Testament / *Tanakh* (24 lectures, 30 min/lecture)

Taught by Amy-Jill Levine, Vanderbilt University, Ph.D., Duke University



The Old Testament, or *Tanakh*, was written in ancient Israel over a period of 1,000 years by many authors.

What can this book teach us about the ancient Israelites? And about who we once were? And what does our faith find in new scholarly understanding?

As Scripture or as the most influential piece of literature ever written, this book is a source of constant wonder, inspiration, and intrigue.

It is cited on the floor of the Senate and from the bench in the courtroom. Contemporary politics is inextricably intertwined with it, from conflict in the Middle East to the claim by many in the United States that a return to "biblical values" is warranted.

The Bible influenced the Pilgrims to leave England in the 17th century; it inspired the founders of the new republic in the 18th; it roused both slave and abolitionist to seek a new Moses and sponsor a new Exodus in the 19th and the Jews to establish a homeland in the 20th.

Certainly it has meant more to more people than any other book in our history.

The influence of ancient Israel's religious and national literature is evident in everything from medieval mystery plays to modern novels, art, music, theater, film, and dance.

As Professor Amy-Jill Levine observes: "The Old Testament is endlessly fascinating because it offers everything to explore: myth, saga, and history; tragedy, comedy, and farce; economics and politics; literature and poetry of surpassing beauty; court intrigue and prophetic morality; heavenly miracles and sometimes heavenly silence; questions of theodicy; answers that satisfy and answers that may not; destruction and rebuilding; despair and hope."

Enjoy Lively and Learned Commentary on the Old Testament

Professor Levine's lively and learned commentary thoughtfully explores selected passages from the texts called the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, and the *Tanakh*.

She provides clear examples of how various approaches to biblical research and interpretation can enrich your understanding of this inexhaustibly fruitful and powerful text.

Joseph Hough, the Dean of Union Theological Seminary, calls her "the best classroom teacher I have seen in my 35 years in theological education, bar none."

Participants concur: "Levine is dynamic, exciting to listen to, and her knowledge of her subject is well organized and conveyed." "Wonderful course. Interestingly taught. Thought provoking, stimulating. Wow!"

Dr. Levine earned her Master's and doctoral degrees from Duke University. Before moving to Vanderbilt, she was the Sara Lawrence Lightfoot Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Religion at Swarthmore College.

She now serves as the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor at the Vanderbilt University Divinity School. She is a prodigious scholar, having published numerous books, articles, and essays addressing topics such as Second-Temple Judaism, Christian origins, Ruth, Esther, Daniel, and the Gospels of Matthew and Mark.

The Old Testament prophets' poetic calls for personal and social justice continue to urge people and nations to reform their lives, even as biblical wisdom literature challenges our views of God, and the Psalms enrich the prayer lives of millions.

Studded with genres ranging from myth and saga to law and proverb, from military history to love poetry, informed by worldviews radically different from yet still foundational to our own, the Old Testa-

ment tells a people's sacred story, a narrative of divine action in history that is holy writ to Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.

A Conceptual Road Map to Biblical Studies

Of course, 24 lectures cannot hope to cover the Old Testament in its entirety. Indeed, the early parts of the Genesis narrative or the stories of Moses and David alone could easily occupy a whole course.

The method of the course is to discuss especially interesting or prominent passages from a cross-section of all the genres the Old Testament contains, using each passage as an example of how to apply a particular method of interpretation to the Bible.

Often Professor Levine uses representative figures or episodes as a highway into biblical meaning. Whether it's the story of Adam and Eve from Genesis, David and Bathsheba from II Samuel, or the apocalyptic imagery found in the Book of Daniel, she brings biblical characters and passages to life and vividly reveals the magnificent artistry that suffuses the Old Testament.

Through these lectures, you will not only probe the content of the biblical books, but you will also explore debates over their meaning, the historical and cultural situations they both reflect and address, and the critical methods by which they have been interpreted.

The lectures presuppose only the most general familiarity with biblical figures and themes (e.g., the Garden of Eden, Moses and the Exodus, the Ten Commandments); biblical literacy, sociologists have noted, is on the wane in the West.

Although students do not need to follow the lectures with an open Bible, reading the texts listed at the top of each of the outlines will enhance appreciation for the material.

Gain Richer Insight into Writings that Form the Spiritual Bedrock for Millions

Even if you know the Old Testament well, you will find it enlightening to hear Professor Levine discuss how it appears against the larger background of the ancient Near East as revealed by research in archaeology, cross-cultural studies, and comparative religion.

Even were one to argue that the text is divinely inspired or dictated by God, one might still want to know as much as possible about the particulars: Why these words? Why this order? Why this social context? Why this translation?

Although she focuses on historical and literary issues, Professor Levine also provides thoughtful reflections and useful information on the religious questions that arise from these sacred texts, and the lectures do not avoid raising issues of religious concern.

The goal of an academic course in biblical studies, she maintains, is not to undermine religious faith, but to use the best available knowledge and research to give believers richer insight into the writings that form their spiritual bedrock.

Religion / Old Testament / Course No. 653 at www.teach12.com

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