Course Description

The Bible is the most significant foundational text of Western civilization. As such, it is a universal book full of ethical teachings that are timeless. However, beneath these eternal lessons the Bible is a book of very specific stories that took place in specific times and in specific places. Most readers of the Bible unfortunately gloss over these seemingly “tedious” or “boring” historical and geographical details, presuming that they are unimportant. For most readers the ethical kernel of the Bible is what matters, not the particularistic historical-geographical shell.

The central assumption of this course is that in order to properly read the Bible, the inner and outer layers of meaning cannot be separated. The outer layer - history and geography - does matter. In fact these outwardly uninspiring details are the key to accessing the inspirational kernel. The spiritual meaning of the Bible can only emerge once you have thoroughly mastered its literal sense. Understanding the impact that location has on the narrative is a major piece of the interpretative puzzle.

This course is designed to provide you with a comprehensive overview of the primary physical setting where the vast majority of the Bible takes place: the Land of Israel. This is a small piece of land at the junction of three continents - Europe, Asia and Africa. But its small physical size masks its massive historical and spiritual importance. Over the course of thirty sessions we will examine the role that the Land of Israel plays in many well-known stories found in the Bible, both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospels. Proceeding chronologically from Abraham to Jesus, we will focus on the crucial role that history and geography play in many familiar biblical narratives. Each one of our “core stories” is situated in a specific region of the Holy Land which we will examine from various physical perspectives: geology, boundaries, climate, flora, roads, etc. We will then analyze how the spiritual meaning of each one these stories is more powerfully understood once the historical and geographical context has been exposed.

Goals

- Students will develop a firm understanding of the various geographical regions which make up the Land of Israel as well as the unique characteristics (geological, climatic, agricultural) of each.
- Students will become more informed regarding the historical background of the Hebrew Bible and Gospels including major political developments that impacted the Holy Land and the entire ancient Near East.
- Students will emerge with a new perspective on the meaning of each of the biblical narratives (“core stories”) which have been the focus of the course.
- Students will make use of the geographical knowledge they have acquired when studying the Bible on their own.
- Students will become familiar with the academic field of historical geography and the central role that it has played in the study of the Bible over the past two hundred years.
- Students will eventually become inspired to visit the Holy Land to explore the geography of the Bible firsthand.
Lecture Outline

1. Introduction: The Geographical Regions of the Land of Israel
2. Genesis: Abraham and Jacob the Nomadic Patriarchs
3. Genesis: Joseph and his Brothers: The Hill Country of Samaria
4. Exodus: The Exodus from Egypt: Part I
5. Exodus: The Exodus from Egypt: Part II
6. Joshua: Joshua Fights the Battle of Jericho: Jordan Valley
7. Judges: Deborah Defeats Sisera in the Jezreel Valley
10. Samuel 1: David Eludes Saul in the Judean Wilderness
11. Samuel 2: The Imperial Capital of David: Jerusalem Part I
12. Samuel 2: David Moves the Ark to Jerusalem: Jerusalem Part II
13. Jonah: Jonah in the Belly of the Fish: The Mediterranean Coastal Plain
14. The Land of Judea in the First Century: The World in which Jesus Lived
15. The Birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judah
16. The Childhood of Jesus in Nazareth
17. John the Baptist in the Wilderness of Judah
18. The Galilean Ministry of Jesus Part I: From Nazareth to Capernaum
19. The Galilean Ministry of Jesus Part II: Around the Sea of Galilee
20. The Galilean Ministry of Jesus Part III: Miracles and Teachings
21. The Gentile Ministry of Jesus Part I: Tyre and Sidon
22. The Gentile Ministry of Jesus Part II: Caesarea-Philippi and the Decapolis
23. Jesus’ Early Journeys to Jerusalem: The Pools of Bethesda and Siloam
24. Jesus’ Final Journey to Jerusalem: Jericho and Bethany
25. The Final Week of Jesus in Jerusalem Part I: The Triumphal Entry
26. The Final Week of Jesus in Jerusalem Part II: The Cleansing of the Temple
27. The Final Week of Jesus in Jerusalem Part III: The Last Supper and Arrest
28. The Final Week of Jesus in Jerusalem Part IV: The Trial by Pontius Pilate
29. The Final Week of Jesus in Jerusalem Part V: The Crucifixion of Jesus
30. Post-Resurrection Appearances of Jesus and Course Conclusion

Recommended Bibliography

We have designed this course so that all the learning takes place live in the virtual classroom. As such, there is no mandatory assigned reading or homework of any kind. Nevertheless, students may wish to consult any of the following texts for additional background.

Atlases & Gazetteers
- Anson F. Rainey and Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge*
- Dan Bahat, *The Illustrated Atlas of Jerusalem*
- Joseph Gardner, *The Reader’s Digest Atlas of the Bible*
- William Schlegel, *Satellite Bible Atlas*
- Y. Aharoni and M. Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*
- Tsafrir, Di Segni, Green, *Tabula Imperii Romani: Iudaea Palaestina*
- R. Steven Notley, *In the Master’s Steps: The Gospels in the Land*
- Paul H. Wright, *Understanding the New Testament: An Introductory Atlas*

**Biblical Archaeology**
- Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*
- Amnon Ben-Tor (ed.), *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*
- P. R. S. Moorey, *A Century of Biblical Archaeology*
- Lee Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*
- Yoram Tsafrir, *Ancient Churches Revealed*

**The Historical Jesus**
- Marcus Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*
- Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans, eds. *Studying the Historical Jesus*
- John D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*
- William Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*
- E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*
- Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*
- W. Stegemann, B.J. Malina, G. Theissen. *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*
- N.T. Wright, *The Contemporary Quest for Jesus*
- P. W. L. Walker, *In the Steps of Jesus*
- Jodi Magness, *Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit: Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus*
- Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*
- Joel Green and Lee McDonald, *The World of the New Testament*
- Randall Price, *The Rose Guide to the Temple*

**The Holy Land**
- Michael Avi-Yonah (ed.), *A History of Israel and the Holy Land*
- Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography*
- Eugene Hoade, *Guide to the Holy Land*
- Robert L. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy*
- William D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*
- George Adam Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*

**Jerusalem**
- Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*
- P. W. L. Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City*
- Simon Goldhill, *Jerusalem: City of Longing*
- Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography*
- Raymond Cohen, *Saving the Holy Sepulchre*
- Randall Price, *Rose Guide to the Temple*
- Oleg Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock*
- O. Grabar and B. Kedar, *Where Heaven and Earth Meet*