ANCIENT ISRAELITE RELIGIONS -- NEJS 211B
Spring 2016
Tuesdays and Fridays 9:30–10:50
Brandeis University
David P. Wright

OBJECTIVE
The course introduces students to and brings them up to date about recent approaches to studying the religions (plural intentional) of ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible. Besides allowing students to learn the data and reconstructions based on them, the course will analyze and critique the methods and arguments used by the authors in their studies. This semester’s work will focus on the issue of family religion.

SCHEDULE AND BOOKS FOR CLASS
Class dates are listed below. No classes will be held: Feb 16, 19 (Break); Mar 25 (Good Friday), Apr 8 (Yale-Brown-Harvard-Brandeis Day), 15 (Regional SBL), 22, 26, 29 (Passover)

There are four units in the course and will focus on the study and discuss of four recent books on Israelite/Biblical religion.

In the first three parts, students will read the same books. A different student will lead the discussion (on one or more chapters as necessary) for one session for each of these books. At least one session (sometimes two) in each unit will be devoted to looking in detail at some evidential issues (e.g., exploring the Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom inscriptions or relevant biblical texts).

In the last (fourth) part of the course, each student will select their own book (from the list at the end of the syllabus or another approved book) and lead a discussion about how it relates to the issues in the other books we’ve studied. Other students will read a substantial/exemplary chapter from that book in preparation for discussion.

1. Jan 15, 19, 22, 26, 29
   van der Toorn, Karel. Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life. Leiden: Brill, 1996. (Selections will be on Latte.)

2. Feb 2, 5, 9, 12, 23, 26

3. Mar 1, 4, 8, 11, 15, 18, 22, 29

4. Apr 1, 5, 12, 19, 21(!)
Choose a book from the list at the end of the syllabus or find another substantial current study or collection of essays. A book chosen outside the syllabus list could be one that adds a comparative or theoretical perspective.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER FOR EACH AUTHOR AND MEETING OF THE COURSE**

1. What is the primary evidence that the study is considering and using in its argument?
2. If a study uses textual (biblical) data, to what extent does it use and correlate archaeological data?
3. Conversely, if a study mainly depends on archaeological data, to what extent does it correlate textual evidence?
4. What are an author’s views, conclusions, or suppositions about the dating of the text and the historical value of the text for reconstructing the period and practices in question?
5. How does a given study differ from those of other authors read in the course or with other scholarship with which you are familiar?
6. What are the strengths and weaknesses in the arguments presented?
7. How would you interpret the data differently?
8. To what extent does the author bring in theoretical models to bear on textual or archaeological data?
9. What other perspectives and models lead to a different (better) articulation and assessment of the evidence?
10. What are the new perspectives and conclusions that the study provides, broadly and specifically?

**WORK FOR THE COURSE**

**Four oral presentations (32%):** Each student will give presentations on readings for four meetings in the course, as outlined in the schedule above. Students should summarize evidence, describe the study’s conclusions, provide critique, and promote discussion in class (see the foregoing list of questions). Students should provide a 1–2 page outline of the reading and a list of about 10 discussion questions three days before their assigned class sessions.

**Four book reviews (32%):** Write an RBL-like review of each book read in the course (each at least 500 words; due 1 week after we finish reading the book).

**Final comprehensive book review (23%):** For the final project, write a *New York Review of Books*-type review on all the books as a group. This last project is to put all the books in dialogue with each other on salient points and common questions and pit their solutions against each other, all the while being critical and constructive. To prepare, read a few full length *NYRB* reviews (on topics of
your interest), to get a sense of how to write this sort of review.

**Participation (13%)**: Students are otherwise expected to have prepared the readings and engage in discussion of the readings for each class session.

**POLICIES**

**Preparation time**: Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).

**Academic Honesty**: You must complete all assignments alone. In your writing, you must follow rules of attribution. Examples of penalties for a student found responsible for an infringement of academic honesty are no credit for the work in question, failure in the course, and the traditional range of conduct sanctions from disciplinary warning through permanent dismissal from the University.

**Students with documented disabilities**: Students with disabilities certified by the Coordinator of Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities in the Office of Undergraduate Academic Affairs and First Year Services will be given reasonable accommodations to complete required assignments. Disabilities that are not documented and approved by the Office of Academic Affairs will not be given accommodations.

**Late Work**: Assignments will be docked 1% per day late. Incompletes will not be given this semester except for reason of personal emergency.

**OTHER BOOKS**


