

HERTOG 2019 SUMMER COURSES THE BIBLE & POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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The Bible is not a book of philosophy, nor is it altogether compatible with or accepting of philosophy—at least not as “philosophy” has traditionally been understood. Still less is the Bible a book of political philosophy in any ordinary sense. But philosophy, strictly speaking, means nothing more or less than the love of wisdom (*philosophia* [Gk.] = *philia* of *sophia*), and the Bible does claim to answer that desire. And political philosophy is first and last an inquiry into the question of the good life, and the Bible certainly speaks to that question. So this Book that at first appears to lie outside the realm of philosophy offers itself and indeed commends itself to us on the most basic of philosophic grounds.

If this is true of the Bible as a whole, it is especially true of Genesis, its first book. Genesis begins with universals (creation, the origins of humanity, the origins of civilization, etc.) and in so doing speaks to the human condition and the basic human questions in their primordial form. Thereafter, with the calling of Abraham (then named Abram) in Chapter 12, the text turns to the formation and the story of a particular people. Yet even here the text speaks universally, for the people whose story is told exemplifies a universal human nature, and the insights that can be discerned from its story are applicable, in principle, to all humanity.

In this class we begin with only one presumption—that Genesis is a rich and instructive book from which we stand to learn much. We make no presumption regarding its authorship or status as divine revelation. (Interestingly, the text makes no such claim on its own behalf.) Our whole method will be to try to understand the text on its own terms, a method that is far more demanding than any other precisely because it can't be developed and employed except by our wrestling with the text itself. I expect that students will bring widely divergent attitudes to the text and that all of us, whatever our backgrounds or beliefs, are capable of approaching it openly and in what one commentator has aptly called a “wisdom-seeking spirit.”

Books:

- *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*, trans. Robert Alter (W. W. Norton & Company, 2008)

Genesis is easy to read but not easy to read well. It is extraordinarily compact. Every word counts, and points of great significance are conveyed by the subtlest literary devices. You should therefore give the reading considerable time and attention, and you should pay attention to the translator's notes.

Resources

To learn more about the ideas discussed in this course, we encourage you to explore a project supported by the Hertog Foundation: **The Great Thinkers** (<http://thegreatthinkers.org/>) and **Contemporary Thinkers** (<http://contemporarythinkers.org/>) websites. These sites are aimed at introducing important thinkers in Western thought, with a particular emphasis on politics and philosophy.

Relevant pages include Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Maimonides, and Aquinas (on The Great Thinkers), and Leon Kass (on Contemporary Thinkers).

Monday, June 24, 2019

9:00 a.m. to Noon

Creation & The Fall

Readings:

- Genesis, Chapters 1–5

Questions:

1. Is there a logical order to Chapter 1's account of the six days of Creation? What patterns and principles do you perceive, and what might they mean? Are there any "slips" or anomalies in the account of Creation, and what might *they* mean?
2. Chapter 1 describes the Creation of the heavens and the earth and all therein, including the first human being. Chapter 2 retells the creation of human beings—and retells it differently. How do these two accounts differ, both empirically and in spirit? Are the differences matters of emphasis or do the two accounts conflict with one another?
3. How should we understand what many have called "The Fall" of man—and woman? Why did Eve eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and why did Adam follow suit? How should we judge this act? How does God judge this act? And how should we understand the ensuing expulsion from Eden? Or to state these matters more provocatively, did Adam and Eve sin, and did God punish them? Was The Fall really a fall?

Tuesday, June 25, 2019

9:00 a.m. to Noon

The Flood

Readings:

- Genesis, Chapters 6–11

Questions:

1. In Chapter 6 "the LORD saw that the evil of the human creature was great on the earth and that *every scheme of his heart's devising was only perpetually evil*. And the LORD regretted having made the human on earth" and decided to "wipe out the human race [He] created from the face of the earth." In Chapter 8, following the Flood and then Noah's unsolicited sacrifice of burnt offerings on an altar he had built, "the LORD said in

His heart, 'I will not again damn the soil on humankind's score. *For the devisings of the human heart are evil from youth.*' Is God's reason for resolving not to destroy humanity the same reason for which he had originally determined to wipe out humanity? How should we understand this?

2. What was Noah's distinction such that he and his family were spared the ravages of Flood? Was he virtuous? Good? Innocent? Is there any reason to think that this new beginning promises a better outcome than the first one?
3. The God of Genesis "regrets" and revises. What does this say about Him and about humanity's relation to Him?

Wednesday, June 26, 2019

9:00 a.m. to Noon

Abraham

Readings:

- Genesis, Chapters 12–24

Questions:

1. What was Abram's distinction such that God should choose him to father a covenantal people?
2. What is the covenant? What is the task given to this people?
3. Prior to his election of Abram, God's injunctions had concerned humanity altogether. Now he singles out one man—one couple—to begin a family that will slowly develop into a particular people. Why would God have decided to focus his efforts so narrowly?
4. "Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (18:26) What gives Abraham the confidence to challenge God? When he "negotiates" with God, why does Abraham stop where he does: after challenging God to spare Sodom if only ten innocent should be found there, why doesn't he ask God to spare the city if there should be only five innocent, or only one?
5. The same Abraham who challenged God to spare the city for the sake of the innocent does not protest when God commands him to sacrifice as a burnt offering "your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac." (22:2–3) Or *is* it the same Abraham? How should we understand these decisions?

Thursday, June 27, 2019

9:00 a.m. to Noon

Isaac & Jacob

Readings:

- Genesis, Chapters 25–35

Questions:

1. How would you describe Isaac's character? And Rebekah's? What is Isaac's task as a patriarch? Does he complete it? What is Rebekah's role in this?

2. In these chapters we follow Jacob from his days as an ambitious and clever young man into his prime as an ambitious and clever older man—but an older man who has been touched and even broken open by God, by the love of a woman, and by hard experience. Is he transformed by these experiences, or does he remain essentially the same person? Does he rise to a height of nobility or holiness or any other kind of character excellence?

Friday, June 28, 2019

9:00 a.m. to Noon

Joseph

Readings:

- Genesis, Chapters 36–50

Questions:

1. Joseph: a gifted if spoiled young man who becomes powerful and beneficent, or a spoiled if gifted young man who becomes the architect of a new Egyptian totalitarianism—or both?
2. Judah: neither the oldest of Jacob's sons nor Jacob's favorite, and hardly without blemish (see his condemnation of Tamar in Chapter 38); yet he rises to leadership of the family and successfully navigates a very treacherous political landscape. What are Judah's natural gifts, and how do these gifts and his character develop over the course of the years?
3. Rachel and Leah are wives of the same man but very differently so. Do their different situations, and the way they respond to these situations, perhaps account for the differences in character and educability between Joseph and Judah?
4. Jacob—again: a visionary or a canny survivor? A man of exalted spirituality or a man with an eye for the main chance? Flawed father or progenitor and educator of a people chosen by God to carry into the world a new and better way of being? Is he not all of these things?
5. Finally, a question about brothers: We speak of brotherhood as synonymous with closeness and loyalty. ("I love him like a brother." Or more grandly, as imagined by Schiller in his "Ode to Joy," "All men become brothers" [*Alle Menschen werden Brüder*].) And yet Genesis also highlights the rivalry and strife that so often bedevil brothers. Think of Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, and of course Cain and Abel. What does the text teach us about this peculiarly intense relationship and how to govern it for the good?