

Course Syllabus

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**Sources of the Western Intellect: A Survey of Ancient Religion, Theology, and
Philosophy
USU 1320-003
Spring, 2019**

Dr. G. McGonagill (please contact via Canvas)

Office hours: Wednesday, 9:30, or by appointment. Eccles Conference Center 108J

Rationale: According to an old legend, the Greek philosopher Plato met the prophet Jeremiah while traveling in Egypt, and this explained the consonance many perceived between Platonic philosophy and the teachings of Moses (i.e., Jewish theology). The philosopher Numenius in the second century AD went so far as to declare that Plato was Moses writing in Greek. In the first few centuries of our era, the Christian Church worked out its theological foundations, the basis of Western intellectual culture, in the context and as an amalgamation of this double heritage: Greek philosophy and Jewish theology.

This course will give students an opportunity to engage with the ancient sources of these two streams. Plato is both the consummation and critic of a long poetic, religious, and philosophical tradition. Both that tradition and the Israelites' self-understanding were shaped by their relations to the civilizations that preceded and surrounded them in the Near East and Egypt.

The most important goal of this class is to give students an opportunity to read some of the texts that have shaped western culture in its origins. The university administration assumes that **students will devote two hours outside of class for every class hour**. Students are graded on that assumption. For this class, the six hours of preparation per week outside of class will mostly be spent reading carefully and re-reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting the assigned texts. Students will be expected to have made a real effort to grasp what the texts say before coming to lecture. These are difficult texts, from cultures whose assumptions are foreign to our own, so this will require serious concentration and time. The ability to sit quietly, read narratives, and contemplate ideas that do not make immediate sense, then to re-read them and think more about them until they start to make sense, and the discipline of sitting in lecture and listening to ideas that do not make immediate sense, and grappling with them until they do, is one of the most important benefits of a university education. These are the intellectual habits that this class is designed to nurture.

Texts: The following books have been made available through the campus bookstore. Other readings will be made available via Canvas. Many of these books are readily available from used bookstores and on-line at discounted prices. Always bring the text we are working on to class so that you can mark passages that we pay special attention to. Introductions to the readings are considered part of the assignment.

- Myths from Mesopotamia (Oxford World's Classics)
- Homer, Iliad (University of Chicago)
- Homer, Odyssey (Harper)

- Plato, Five Dialogues (Hackett)
- Plato, Republic (Hackett)
- Bible (Oxford World's Classics)

A note on the material: As they say on TV, some narratives and images discussed in this class may not be appropriate for immature audiences. An important aspect of this class will be to examine how the religious traditions we will be studying dealt with problematic and, to many readers, both then and now, unsavory aspects of their sacred narratives. Historical scholarship demands that these things be confronted frankly. I expect all members of the class to treat these matters with the maturity and scholarly disinterest appropriate to university-level study.

Cell phones must disappear as class begins. They distract those sitting near them.

Graded Assignments

1. Online reading quizzes. These will allow students to demonstrate that they have read the texts with care **before the lectures**. They cannot be made up under any circumstance.

2. Four mid-term examinations. These will allow students to demonstrate that they have thought about the texts we are reading and the discussions we will have had about them in class. All mid-terms will be cumulative, with emphasis on material covered since the previous mid-term.

3. Final examination: Comprehensive, with emphasis on material presented during the last section of the class.

Components of final grade

- Reading quizzes: 25%
- Mid-term examinations: 7% for the first, 16% each for the other three
- Final examination: 20%

Failure to complete any of the mid-terms or the final will be grounds for failing the class. Privacy concerns militate against any discussion of grades over e-mail. All discussion of grades must occur in person.

No Hail Mary passes. The schedule of graded assignments for the term is designed to reward faithful attention to the class from January through May. We will be developing an argument over the course of the term that depends on all of the sources we are reading, from the beginning through the end. If you choose to blow off the class early in the term, do not look for salvation through extra-credit assignments at the end. There will be none.

Students who require special accommodations should go immediately to the Center for Persons with Disabilities. If you find yourself struggling in this or any class, you may want to avail yourself of the resources of the Academic Success Center.