

THE BIBLE IN THE FOUNDING OF AMERICA (6HT605)

Reformed Theological Seminary

Washington, D.C.

Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations: ask thy father, and he will show thee; thy elders, and they will tell thee. – Deuteronomy 32:7

Yea, I have a goodly heritage. – Psalm 16:6 b

SPRING 2010

Instructor:	Daniel Dreisbach	Time:	Tuesdays, 7:30 – 10 P.M.
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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The political rhetoric of the American founding era (approximately the last third of the eighteenth century) is replete with quotations from and allusions to the Bible. Late-eighteenth-century Americans were biblically literate, and it is no surprise that leaders of the age invoked familiar biblical texts in their discourses. This course will examine the place and uses of the Bible in the founding of the American republic and its institutions. Of special interest is how the Bible informed notions of liberty, civic virtue, political order, and law. The course will examine how the founding generation encountered, appropriated, grappled with, and, ultimately, was shaped by the text sacred to the Christian faith.

The course will begin with a brief discussion of the social forces that produced an English language translation of the Bible and the political consequences of making the Bible available in the common tongue. The class will then consider the extent to which the Bible informed the American founding generation's answers to basic and enduring questions of political and legal theory and shaped their vision for republican self-government. Among the questions this course will address are: What importance did the American founders attach to the Bible as a guide to the issues and challenges that confronted them? How did they use the Bible in their political and legal discourse? Which biblical passages appealed most to this generation? In what ways did the Bible inform their perceptions of themselves, their times, and their political pursuits? Did the founders look to the Bible (and Christianity) to define the liberties and civic responsibilities of citizens in a free society? Did they believe biblical Christianity was essential to nurturing the civic virtues that give citizens the capacity for self-government?

This course will draw on and examine state papers, political sermons, newspapers, and private writings of the era. Selected biblical passages frequently cited in this literature will be examined in their biblical contexts, as well as in the historical, literary, political, legal, and

theological contexts in which late-eighteenth-century writers used them. The course will consider the reasons why these biblical texts appealed to the founding generation.

Students who successfully complete this course will be able to (1) identify the social, religious, and political forces that produced the English Bible, (2) describe the social, religious, and political consequences of making the Bible available in the common tongue, (3) identify major intellectual influences on the American founders and founding principles, (4) identify and discuss biblical texts that address civil authority and the biblical texts most frequently referred to in the political literature of the American founding, (5) identify and analyze diverse uses of the Bible in the political discourse of the founding era, and (6) assess the influence of Christianity, in general, and the Bible, in particular, on late-eighteenth-century American political and legal cultures and the emerging constitutional tradition.

TEXTS:

King James (Authorized) Version of the Holy Bible (1611)

Benson Bobrick, *Wide as the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution it Inspired* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001). ISBN: 9780142000595.

Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall, eds., *The Sacred Rights of Conscience: Selected Readings on Religious Liberty and Church-State Relations in the American Founding* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 2009). ISBN: 9780865977150.

Recommended Reading:

David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2003).

Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001).

REQUIREMENTS: Students are expected to attend all classes, read assigned materials, and participate in class discussions when appropriate. Students will also be required to write a couple short essays, give a brief in-class presentation based on the first writing assignment, and take a final written examination. Written work will be graded on the strength and clarity of argument, organization of ideas, originality, and effective use of course and research materials. Written work should be concise, neat (typed, double-spaced), free of grammatical and spelling errors, and submitted on time. The use of another person's words or ideas without proper attribution constitutes plagiarism and is a serious academic offense. By turning in an essay, a student is certifying that the work is entirely his/her own work.

GRADES: Final grades will be based on: (1) class attendance, preparation, and participation (20%); (2) two short essays (40%); (3) an in-class oral presentation (5%); and (4) a final examination (35%). These percentages are meant to give you guidance and are *not* cast in stone!

GRADING SCALE:

A	97-100
A-	94-96
B+	91-93
B	88-90
B-	86-87
C+	83-85
C	80-82
C-	78-79
D	70-77
F	below 70

The grade “A,” including pluses and minuses (94-100), is reserved for truly superior work. It means the student completed all assignments on time, attended all classes (or offered explanations prior to absences), participated enthusiastically in class discussions, and written work was original, stimulating, well organized, carefully researched, and used language correctly. The grade “B,” including pluses and minuses (93-86), refers to good work (not merely satisfactory) that demonstrates a command of course materials, with no serious deficiencies. The grade “B” means the student completed all assignments, attended class regularly, and participated in class discussions. A “C” or “C+” (80-85) refers to satisfactory work indicating effective control of large elements of the course. The grades of “C-” (78-79) and “D” (70-77) are reserved for students who fail to attend class regularly; who are disruptive in class or decline to make positive contributions to the class; and whose work is turned in late (without adequate explanation), poorly written and presented (numerous grammatical and spelling errors), or reveals a lack of familiarity with course materials. An “F” (0-69) indicates a failure to complete the course requirements with a minimum degree of competence or a failure to do them at all.

CLASS SCHEDULE (tentative):

Reading assignments must be completed *before* class in order to facilitate fruitful class discussions. This schedule might be adjusted during the semester to accommodate additional discussion, guest speakers, or other unexpected events. Alterations to the schedule will be announced in class.

1. Introduction / Course Information

The Bible in America: A Brief Introduction

READ: *Sacred Rights of Conscience*, 4-15.

History of the English Bible

2. Introduction to the American Constitutional Tradition:

The Seventeenth Century: A Century of Reformation and Colonization

READ: *Sacred Rights of Conscience*, 84-107.

The Eighteenth Century: A Century of Revival and Revolution

READ: *Sacred Rights of Conscience*, 220-222, 241-253, 257-264.

3. *History of the English Bible* (continued . . .)

READ: Benson Bobrick, *Wide as the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution it Inspired* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001).

4. *How the Bible Shaped American Public Culture*

STUDY: Deuteronomy 16:18-20.

The Bible and American Law

READ: *Sacred Rights of Conscience*, 84-86, 88-103.

5. *The Bible and the American Founding Fathers*

READ: *Sacred Rights of Conscience*, 231-234.

Who are the Founding Fathers?

READ: Daniel L. Dreisbach, "Founders Famous and Forgotten," *The Intercollegiate Review* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 3-12.

The Bible in the Political Discourse of the American Founding

READ: *Sacred Rights of Conscience*, 229, 348-349, 350-351, 354, 464.

6. *Micah 6:8 in the Political Literature of the American Founding*

STUDY: Micah 6:1-8.

READ: Psalm 50; Deuteronomy 6:4-6; Matthew 22:34-40.

George Washington, Circular Letter to the States, 8 June 1783, in *Sacred Rights of Conscience*, 296-298; read also 130-131.

The Election Sermon in American Public Culture

Defining Liberty in the New Nation: 2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 5:1.

7. *Prayer in the First Congress, September 7, 1774*

READ: Psalm 35; *Sacred Rights of Conscience*, 216, 219.

The Exalted Nation: The Character of a Righteous People: Proverbs 14:34

READ: Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28.

When the Righteous Rule: The Character of a Righteous Ruler: Proverbs 29:2 and Exodus 18:21

READ: Proverbs 28 and 29; Exodus 18; Deuteronomy 1:1-18.

Charles Chauncy, Civil Magistrates Must be Just, Ruling in the Fear of God (1747), in *Sacred Rights of Conscience*, 179-195.

8. *The Bible, Religious Disobedience, and the American Revolution: Romans 13 and Act 5:29*

STUDY: Romans 13:1-7; Acts 5:29.

READ: Jonathan Mayhew, *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-resistance to the Higher Powers* (Boston, 1750).

[Stephen Case,] *Defensive Arms Vindicated; and the Lawfulness of the American War Made Manifest. By A Moderate Whig* (1783 [1779]).

9. *The “Vine and Fig Tree” Motif in the Literature of the American Founding: Micah 4:4*

STUDY: Micah 4:1-5.

READ: 1 Kings 4:25; Zechariah 3:10; (cf. 2 Kings 18:31; Isaiah 36:16); Isaiah 2:2-5; Leviticus 26:6; *Sacred Rights of Conscience*, 464.

The Great Themes of Religious Liberty in the American Experience

READ: *Sacred Rights of Conscience*, 169 (images), 241-247, 250-251, 309-313, 433, 464, 468-471.

10. FINAL EXAMINATION