The Bible's Many Voices

Study Guide/Syllabus

By Michael Carasik
The Bible’s Many Voices

Introduction

“The Bible remains what it has always been: the one thousand-year slice of civilization that has shaped the culture we live in today. As you might expect, one thousand years of writing could not possibly be in a monotone. My obligation (and my joy) as a scholar, my challenge (and my pleasure) as a writer, are to introduce you to as many of the biblical authors as I can within the space of this small book.” Michael Carasik

This book is intended for students of the Bible who want to appreciate its literary genres and it linguistic genius.

Professor Michael Carasik, a gifted biblical teacher, introduces us to the majestic coat of many colors that is the Hebrew Bible. What follows is a 24 unit syllabus that surveys the historical, theological, legal, philosophical, and prophetic voices of Scripture. He even gives us a glimpse of women’s voices, and voices from the wider world that influences the sacred canon.

The study of the Hebrew Bible in the Jewish community is often confined to the weekly Torah portion. Surely the Bible deserves to be engaged in its full splendor. This book and syllabus offers an intriguing way in. The seeker with the motivation and patience to examine the trees will begin discerning the biblical forest in all its dazzling diversity.

All you need for this journey are a Bible (may we suggest The JPS TANAKH), The Bible’s Many Voices, and this study guide. Whether you are a teacher of the class, a student, or simply an interested reader, we hope that your experience will echo the author’s when he writes, “I have spent many happy hours listening to the voices of the biblical writers and of their later interpreters. The purpose of this book is to make them come alive for you as they have for me.”

Rabbi Barry L. Schwartz
The Jewish Publication Society
The Bible's Many Voices

Syllabus

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The Bible's Many Voices

Unit 1 Introduction to the Bible

Goal: To understand what “the Bible” really is and how the meaning of the Bible and even its contents differs depending on whose Bible you open.

Readings
Many Voices: Read Me First (pp. xi–xiii)
Many Voices: “Whose Bible is It?” (pp. 1–21)
Many Voices: Jewish and Christian Biblical Order (pp. 351–352)

Questions for Discussion
• What is the difference between the Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant Bibles?
• What do the different arrangements of Jewish and Christian Bibles say about their content?
• How does contemporary culture shape our response to the Bible?
• Is treating the Bible as a human book compatible with religious belief?

Unit 2 The Bible in Translation

Goal: To understand how the Bible translation you use shapes what you read.

Readings
Many Voices: “The Sound of the Biblical Voices” (pp. 23–35).
Genesis 1

Other Biblical Texts Discussed: Proverbs, Esther, Jeremiah

Questions for Discussion
What do we gain and what do we lose by reading the Bible in translation?
There were variant Hebrew texts in antiquity. So which Bible is “the original”?
When, and why, did further changes in biblical texts become impossible?

Unit 3 The Bible in Conversation with Itself

Goal: To begin hearing the Bible not as a monologue but as a conversation, and to understand the many different ways in which biblical texts are an interplay of voices.

Readings
Many Voices: “The Sound of the Biblical Voices” (pp. 35–61).
Psalm 148
Exodus 6:2–3
Questions for Discussion
How are we to reconcile contradictions that are found in the Bible itself?
What do we gain by complicating our understanding of the Bible?
Are some biblical voices more “legitimate” than others?

Unit 4 The Bible and “History”

Goal: To understand difference between “Bible stories” and biblical history.

Readings
Many Voices: “Historical Voices” (pp. 62–86)
1 Samuel 17; 1 Samuel 21:9–10 and 25:29; 2 Samuel 21:19 and 1 Chronicles 20:5
1 Chronicles 11 and 2 Samuel 23
1 Kings 5:17–19 and 1 Chronicles 22:7–10; 1 Kings 6:1 and 2 Chronicles 3:1–2
1 Kings 10–11 and 2 Chronicles 9

Questions for Discussion
Who killed Goliath? Why did it matter to the various biblical writers? Why does it matter now?
How do the views of David and Solomon in Chronicles differ from those in Samuel and Kings?
What should we think about David and Solomon as actual historical personalities?
How should this affect what contemporary Jews and Christians think about them?

Unit 5 The Deuteronomist and the Chronicler

Goal: To understand the ideological background behind the Bible’s historical texts.

Readings
Many Voices: “Historical Voices” (pp. 86–97)
Deuteronomy 17:14–20
2 Chronicles 30 and 2 Kings 23
Judges 2:11–23

Questions for Discussion
What was the Deuteronomic view of history, and what prompted it?
How was this different by the time of the Chronicler, and why might it have changed?
Unit 6  The Sources of the Pentateuch

Goal: To understand what led scholars of the Bible to believe that the Pentateuch developed from earlier, written sources.

Readings
*Many Voices*: “Theological Voices” (pp. 98–110)
1 Samuel 15:24–31
Genesis 6:9–9:19

Questions for Discussion
What are the differences between the two voices that tell the Flood story?
What underlies these differences?
Why might such differences remain when two earlier versions of the story were combined?
What other possible ways might one explain the differences?

Unit 7  Immanence and Transcendence

Goal: To recognize the voices that proclaim God’s immanence (the “Presence” theology) and transcendence (the “name” theology).

Readings
*Many Voices*: “Theological Voices” (pp. 110–124)
Ezekiel 1:27–28
Exodus 24:16–17
Exodus 34:27–35
Exodus 40:33–38
Exodus 6:2–3 and 3:15
Judges 13:17–18 and Genesis 32:27–30
Deuteronomy 12:4–5 and 1 Kings 5:19
1 Kings 8

Questions for Discussion
How does the Bible describe God’s Presence, and what is the nature of that Presence?
Why does Deuteronomy use God’s name to symbolize God?
What is the purpose of having a Temple, according to each of these perspectives?
Unit 8  Deuteronomy and History

Goal: To recognize the connection between the Deuteronomic perspective and the book of Kings and to begin to think about the social and historical sources of the theological voices.

Readings
*Many Voices:* “Theological Voices” (pp. 124–132)
1 Kings 15:1–3
2 Kings 23:25 and Deuteronomy 6:5
1 Kings 8:46–49

Questions for Discussion
Why and how might historical events prompt a particular theological outlook?
What other causes might be responsible for biblical texts with particular ideas?
What are some good arguments for and against the centralization of worship?

Unit 9  Law and Narrative

Goal: To recognize that the Pentateuch presents laws and lawgiving not independently but as part of a story.

Readings
*Many Voices:* “Legal Voices” (pp. 133–141)
Numbers 15:32–36
Numbers 27:1–11 and 36:1–13
Exodus 16

Questions for Discussion
What makes the first five books of the Bible a unit?
What different kinds of laws are given as part of the biblical story?
What are the implications of laws given in this way?

Unit 10  The Ten Commandments

Goal: To understand the complications behind our use of the phrase “the Ten Commandments.”

Readings
*Many Voices:* “Legal Voices” (pp. 141–148)
Exodus 20
Deuteronomy 5
Exodus 34

Questions for Discussion
What are the differences between the Exodus 20 version and Moses’ repetition of it?
What might explain the differences?
Where does the name “the Ten Commandments” come from?
Why are there “Ten” commandments as opposed to some other number?
How would you divide each set into 10?

Unit 11  The Varieties of Biblical Law

Goal: To understand the range of different sources in the Pentateuch that present the various laws.

Readings
Many Voices: “Legal Voices” (pp. 148–153)
Exodus 21–23
selected texts from:
Leviticus 1, 13, 19
Numbers 5, 6, 19
Deuteronomy 12, 15, 21

Questions for Discussion
What different kinds of law are presented in the Pentateuch?
What different literary genres are used to present law?
Which laws were specific to their own time and which were meant to be applicable today?

Unit 12  The Slave Laws

Goal: To compare and contrast the slave laws of Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus.

Readings
Many Voices: “Legal Voices” (pp. 153–162)
Exodus 21:2–6
Deuteronomy 15:12–18
Leviticus 25:39–46

Questions for Discussion
How do these three laws differ?
What is the relationship between the three?
What role do the slave laws play in their legal groupings and in the larger story?
Unit 13  Law Outside the Pentateuch

Goal: To understand the role law plays in the Bible as a whole.

Readings
Many Voices: “Legal Voices” (pp. 162–173)
Genesis 38:8–9, Deuteronomy 25:5–6, Ruth 4:1–10
Jeremiah 34:8–22

Questions for Discussion
What are the different words used for “law” in the Bible? What are their implications?
Were the laws found in the Pentateuch used in the same way as laws in our contemporary world?
What role does law play in the Bible outside the Pentateuch?

Unit 14  The Nature of Biblical Prophecy

Goal: To understand what prophecy meant in the world of the Bible.

Readings
Many Voices: “Prophetic Voices” (pp. 174–189)
Jonah 3
1 Samuel 10:9–13, 19:18–24
2 Kings 13:14–19
1 Kings 22

Questions for Discussion
What was it like to hear a prophet? To be one?
What was the prophet’s job, and how did prophets do it?
How can you tell whether or not someone is a “true” prophet?

Unit 15  Prophecy and Politics

Goal: To understand the political role of prophecy.

Readings
Many Voices: “Prophetic Voices” (pp. 189–207)
1 Kings 21:17–19
2 Kings 22
Isaiah 45:1–7
Ezekiel 26
Jeremiah 26–28
Jeremiah 16:18 and Isaiah 40:1–2

**Questions for Discussion**
What kinds of political roles did the prophets play?

**Unit 16  Biblical Perspectives on Women**

**Goal:** To examine biblical attitudes toward women and the various roles that women play in the Bible.

**Readings**
*Many Voices:* “Women’s Voices” (pp. 208–222, 231–237)
2 Kings 4:8–37
Numbers 30
1 Samuel 18:6–9
Judges 5
2 Samuel 14:1–20, 20:1–22
Judges 11

**Questions for Discussion**
What kinds of roles could women play in ancient Israel?
Which roles were specific to women?
What does biblical language reveal about social attitudes toward gender?

**Unit 17  Two Books Written by Women**

**Goal:** To become familiar with the two biblical books that can plausibly be understood as having been written by women.

**Readings**
*Many Voices:* “Women’s Voices” (pp. 222–231)
Ruth
Song of Songs

**Questions for Discussion**
How does the language, plot, and perspective of Ruth differ from other biblical stories?
How does the Song of Songs’ attitude toward sexuality differ from that elsewhere in the Bible?
What is the relationship between each of these books and the rest of the Bible?
Unit 18 “Solomon” the Wise

Goal: To understand the role human wisdom plays in the Bible, and to become familiar with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Readings
Many Voices: “Voices of the Wise” (pp. 238–261)
1 Kings 3 and 10
1 Kings 5:10–12
Proverbs 1:1–7
Proverbs 22
Proverbs 31:10–31
Ecclesiastes 1 and 3
Ecclesiastes 11:9 and Numbers 15:37–39
Ecclesiastes 12

Questions for Discussion
In what sense are the proverbs in Proverbs “proverbs of Solomon”?
What is the difference between a sentence-proverb and an instruction?
Why would a sage use one form or the other?
Why is Qohelet called “son of David, king in Jerusalem”?
Why does Qohelet describe everything as hevel? What does he mean by that word?
How does the voice at the end of Ecclesiastes change our understanding of the book?

Unit 19 The Book of Job

Goal: To begin the study of the book of Job.

Readings
Many Voices: “Voices of the Wise” (pp. 261–274)
Ezekiel 14:12–14
Genesis 22:1–19
Job 1–3, 28, 40–42

Questions for Discussion
Why does God test Job?
Who is “the Prosecutor”?
How does Job react to his sufferings? How do his friends react?
What is the meaning of God’s response?
Which of the characters in the book are acting wisely?
Unit 20  Wisdom from the Wider World

Goal: To encounter the foreign sources of wisdom in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Readings
Many Voices: “Foreign Voices” (pp. 275–286)
Ecclesiastes 9:7–9 with Gilgamesh passage
Proverbs 22:17–21 with excerpt from the Instruction of Amenemope

Questions for Discussion
What made it possible—and appropriate—for wisdom literature to draw on foreign sources?
How did Israelite authors encounter this foreign material?

Unit 21  Foreign Cultural Influences on Biblical Israel

Goal: To learn about the cultures that surrounded biblical Israel and how they influenced the text of our Bibles.

Readings
Many Voices: “Foreign Voices” (pp. 286–300)
Psalm 104
Ezekiel 28

Questions for Discussion
Why would biblical laws bear such close resemblance to foreign laws?
What other aspects of foreign culture might have been adopted by the Israelites?
Which aspects of foreign culture would have been alien to them?

Unit 22  The Ten (?) Plagues

Goal: To examine the different biblical versions of the Egyptian plagues, and to begin to think about the purpose of the biblical stories.

Readings
Many Voices: “Voices of Song and Legend” (pp. 301–312)
Exodus 7:14–11:10
Psalm 78:40–55
Psalm 105
Questions for Discussion
How many plagues were there?
What role do the plagues play in the story of the exodus as told in the book of Exodus?
What role do they play in the psalms?
Are the stories in the Bible myth, history, or something in between?

Unit 23 The Creation Stories

Goal: To look more closely at the many different ways the Bible describes creation.

Readings
Many Voices: “Voices of Song and Legend” (pp. 312–328)
Isaiah 45:9–18 and 40:12–26
Proverbs 8:22–31
Psalm 104:1–9
Job 38
Isaiah 51:9–11
Exodus 15:1–18
Psalm 114

Questions for Discussion
How do the different biblical voices describe creation?
What accounts for these differences?
What is the relationship between creation and the exodus?

Unit 24 The Bible and Its Aftermath

Goal: To sample the vast range of later works that have responded to the Bible.

Readings
Many Voices: “Echoes and Reverberations” (pp. 329–350)
Genesis 12:10–16 with excerpt from the Genesis Apocryphon
Isaiah 6:9–10 with Matt 13:10–17
b. Hullin 60a

Questions for Discussion
What are some of the ways in which later writers responded to the Bible?
Are all—or any—of these responses legitimate? How would the biblical writers react to them?
How has your own relationship with the Bible changed after taking this course?