Redesigning RLST 306: Biblical Theology

I have taught RLST 306 twice, in the fall of 2004 and the fall of 2006. Herold Weiss, a New Testament scholar, created Biblical Theology over twenty years ago. Both he and John Fotopoulos, also a New Testament scholar, taught the course, and I am the most recent professor to do so. Although the content of the course has varied depending upon the faculty member teaching it, no changes have been made to the course's basic structure. In light of recent debates within the field of biblical studies about biblical theology, as well as the fact that I am a Hebrew Bible scholar who neither studies nor teaches the first part of the Bible as distinctly Christian scripture, I think that it is time to examine carefully the course that I have inherited and to redesign the course title and description in order to create an introductory course in the Hebrew Bible for religious studies majors and minors. An examination of the course title and description as well as current RLST offerings in biblical studies will explain why such revisions are necessary.

Biblical theology itself is a particular Christian way of reading Scripture that seeks to find the first person of the Trinity, or Jesus' father, in the Hebrew Bible.
I have not been trained to teach the Hebrew Bible as a Christian text, and although I could educate myself to do so, I choose not to for the following reasons. First, most students' exposure to the Hebrew Bible is woefully inadequate, limited primarily to short first readings in Mass that are then overlooked in homilies. Five years of teaching RLST 225, in which Jewish and Christian readings of the Hebrew Bible are analyzed, has brought home this point. I do not think religious studies majors are served by taking a seminar that continues to neglect a significant portion of the Bible by reading it exclusively as a Christian text. Second, I deliberately ground my pedagogy in the reading

and interpreting of the Hebrew Bible as Jewish Scripture first; if students choose to read these texts as preludes to the Christian story, then that is their prerogative, but they can only do so after gaining a clear sense of what the Hebrew Bible meant to the ancient Israelites and what it means to modern Jews. Biblical theology takes the opposite approach. Third, if students want to read the Bible as a Christian text, the department offers two outstanding New Testament offerings; but even those, however, focus almost exclusively on reading the New Testament from an historical and not a theological perspective. This is the common approach of modern biblical scholars, and department offerings in both testaments should be theoretically consistent even if the specific subject matter varies. A proper grounding in the historical-critical method and reading biblical texts in context is a necessary prerequisite to any theological interpretation, and the cart should not be put before the horse.

The course description itself is also bothersome. It reads as follows:

> This course acquaints students with the Hebrew and Christian biblical writings, giving attention to their basic social-historical, literary, and theological characteristics. Attention is given to compositional issues and to the subsequent transmission of these writings.

Originally, RLST 306 included texts from both testaments, because only one person taught in biblical studies. The department now has two bible scholars, Dr. John Fotopoulos and myself; at the 300 level, he teaches in his specialty, the New Testament, and I teach in mine. Therefore, the first phrase of the course description is outdated. The second phrase is too broad. Technically, to pay attention to all three types of characteristics requires the use of at least four different types of biblical criticism, social-scientific, historical-critical, literary, and canonical. Canonical criticism is the tool of biblical theologians, and for the above-mentioned reasons, I do not use it. The

introduction of students to other forms of biblical criticism, however, is a worthy goal and one which I have tried to achieve when teaching RLST 306; but, the course description overlooks what to me should be a fundamental effect of introducing students to the biblical narrative, and that is making sure that they know the story. The Hebrew Bible specifically is one particular ethnic group's saga, from wandering to slavery to freedom to monarchy to exile to life as a religious community. This story includes high drama, low comedy, and botched romances, peppered throughout with snappy dialogue. Teaching that story requires a great deal of focus on the biblical texts themselves and not quite so much upon how modern scholars interpret them.

The second sentence of the course description is trying to do too much. It is possible and important to pay attention to compositional issues, particularly when two biblical books (Samuel-Kings and Chronicles, for example) tell the same story in different ways. To study transmission, however, goes beyond the scope of the Hebrew Bible into its translations (the Greek Septuagint, for example) and interpretations (the Dead Sea Scrolls, Jubilees, midrash). There is simply not enough time in one semester to do everything that the course description suggests, and the first time I taught this course, it suffered greatly from my attempts to do so.

This proposal allows me to design a course that functions as a general introduction to the Hebrew Bible. Students will be exposed to different forms of biblical criticism, such as historical, form, source, and social-scientific, and they will have the opportunity to apply these in written work. Pedagogically, however, I will emphasize my academic specialty, rhetorical criticism. Rhetorical criticism studies the language used in and the arguments made by a particular text, with an emphasis on close reading. When I

teach bible courses, a number of students say that they are looking forward simply to reading texts that they have heard about but upon which they have never laid their eyes. I want my students to open the Bible, sit down, and read it. When I have taught RLST 306 in the past, I have had my students read the entire former prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings) plus the rewriting of this narrative in 1-2 Chronicles. This is a tall order, and I at first thought that in light of the course description, I was asking too much of my students. I probably was then, but I realize now that I am not. The emphasis on these books and the stories they tell allow students to study the Hebrew Bible not solely as theology but as entertaining narratives with agendas that change as historical and social contexts change. The Bible comes from the Greek word meaning "books"; ideally, an introduction to the Hebrew Bible should reveal the plurality of perspective as well as the growing emphasis in the texts on worshipping a single deity.

For the department, again, this course is the only Hebrew Bible offering that fulfills the biblical studies requirement for majors. Because of its highly specific methodology and focus, the other course that I teach, on feminist biblical criticism of the prophets, counts as an elective for RLST majors, an upper level choice for RLST minors, and for Women's Studies elective credit. My experience of teaching RLST 390: Reading and Interpreting Hebrew Bible Prophets (fall 2005 and fall 2007; the course will be submitted to Curriculum Committee as a permanent offering this spring) has reiterated the need both for specific offerings in Hebrew Bible and a more general course. Most religious studies majors enter the program with little knowledge of the first part of their Bibles. In 2004, I taught an independent study for a senior RLST major who was planning to go to graduate school in religion. She had not had a Hebrew Bible course and

did not want to submit a transcript to some of the top schools in the country that was lacking in that area. Although only one biblical studies course is required for graduation, since the hiring of both Dr. Fotopoulos and me, a majority of majors are now taking both of us. Having permanent offerings in each testament adds flexibility and ensures that majors leave the program with competency in both testaments, which is a necessity for post-graduate study.

I have decided to apply for the CFAI grant now so that I may design the new course over the summer and submit it to Curriculum Committee this fall. There are two practical reasons for doing so. First, a new bulletin will be printed for 2009-11, and I want the new course to be included. This gives both current and incoming students an accurate description of all course offerings in biblical studies. Second, if I am granted tenure, then I am eligible for a sabbatical during the 2009-10 academic year; I hope to use that time to do research related to RLST 225: Reading the Hebrew Bible in Jewish and Christian Terms, which I teach for general education credit and as an Intercultural Studies elective. Due to the proliferation of published work in Jewish-Christian relations since I earned my doctorate in 2003, as well as my plan to nurture the relationships I have developed with South Bend's rabbis in order to strengthen the course's content and my pedagogy, I hope to have much to do next summer. This summer, however, is the right time for me to finish creating a two-course sequence for upper-level RLST credit in the Hebrew Bible that covers a significant portion of the canon and gives students the opportunity to engage the texts critically.