Module 1 AVP Transcript

This course is designed to empower the student to read the Bible. In an introductory course, we can only do so much. However, our ultimate goal is to help the student who is reading the Old Testament to be able to learn techniques that will aid in developing critical reading skills. To do this, there will be a balanced approach with some standard concepts in addition to contemporary approaches. Finding that the Old Testament was written in an informal narrative requires the student to engage the study proactively. So sit back, and enjoy Encountering Ancient Voices!

To begin, it is necessary to ask the same kinds of questions that journalists have asked for a long time: who, what, when, where, why, and how? This course examines not only the words found in the Old Testament books themselves but how they got there in the first place. Who wrote them, and for what purposes? This kind of examination is important on many levels, but not the least of which is the realization that the books known as “the Hebrew Scriptures” by some and “the Old Testament” by others form a foundation upon which, literally, billions of human beings ground their lives in faith. This module surveys some basic facts about the Old Testament that lays the foundation for the study.

Just what are we studying? The Old Testament is not a single book, of course. It is truly a library of many texts and of many genres and literary styles. Naturally, this is important, because how we read history, for example, is different from the way we read a novel; and we don’t read a novel in the same way we read a poem or sing a song. All of this, and more, is part of the Old Testament texts: poetry, law, history, prophecy, and apocalyptic are all here. What’s more, they are expressed in different languages, each with their own vocabularies and meanings: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. In EAV, Carvalho notes that the Old Testament is a collection of sacred literature. Check out her explanation for yourself.

Who wrote the texts contained in the Old Testament? Over hundreds of years, dozens of authors and editors contributed their skills, insights, perspectives, and judgments to the effort. Yet for people of faith for whom the Old Testament is foundational—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—God is the ultimate author of every text, with the human authors acting as conduits through which God’s message is communicated.

When, where, and how were these texts created? Scholars debate many of the specifics, but the preparation of these various texts covered hundreds of years; and while they were written largely in ancient Palestine, the influences upon the texts were far-reaching, reflecting the thought of many peoples and cultures. The texts themselves were hand-written on parchment, but we have no “autographed” copies of the texts; this means that we have no “original” copies. Everything we have is a copy of a copy. What’s even more challenging is that we have literally thousands of parchment scraps, some no larger than a postage stamp, to examine for clues. In many ways, textual analysis can look and feel much like putting together a jigsaw puzzle!

Perhaps the most important question of all, of course, is WHY? Why did believers write all of this material down in the first place? Think about that: this was not an easy task. It took dedication to pick up a quill and the ridiculously expensive parchment and begin to prepare a text by hand to be passed along to others. Unlike texting today, or even e-mail, which can be done largely without thinking, this was a completely different endeavor. Perhaps authors were being persecuted, and the text in question was intended to give its readers hope. Or were the authors trying to explain their beliefs to people of other cultures who were demanding an explanation? Were the authors trying to make a record of events for their own people to hand over to succeeding generations? All of these considerations affect not only what is written but gives us an insight into the faith and lives of the people involved.

Ultimately, the people wrote these texts to describe their relationship with their God. This relationship is often referred to as a covenant relationship, established several times by God with the people called by God to be God’s people. This covenant, which is also translated as “testament,” forms the basis of the scriptures of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It’s all about the people and their relationship with God.

As you read, please keep these points in mind:
1. The texts were written as reflections of faith, from the perspective of faith, and not simply as historical records. We simply cannot read these books like we would a modern history book; to do so will result in a grave distortion of the meaning of the texts.

2. The human authors of the texts were influenced, as all authors are, by the social, historical, spiritual, and cultural contexts in which they lived; these influences affect their writing, and it will be important to consider these influences in detail as we consider the choices the authors make.

3. The Catholic Church and many Protestant traditions believe that the Old Testament continues to reflect a saving promise from God; it has not been superseded by later Christian scriptures. In fact, supercessionism, which holds that the Old Testament has been replaced by the New Testament, is expressly condemned by the Catholic Church and most mainline Protestant churches and denominations. It is the view of the Church that God does not “take back” or “renege” on His promises: the covenant established with the ancient peoples remains in force.

Throughout the course, we will refer to the Hebrew Scriptures as Jewish people themselves refer to them: TaNaCH (pronounced “tah – nahk”). The “T” stands for “Torah” (pronounced “toe-rah”), meaning law or instruction; “Nevi‘im” (pronounced “neh-vee-eem”) who were the prophets; and “CHetuvim” (pronounced “keh-too-veem”), which were the writings. This ancient arrangement helps us to understand better how the Jewish people themselves understood their sacred scriptures.

I think it will be helpful if I take a moment to explain how the textbook works to complement reading the Old Testament itself. As our author states, the textbook is not designed to replace the reading of Scripture. Rather, it is to supplement your reading. Looking at the section entitled “Discussions of Biblical Text and Canonical Order.” If you notice, when you compare the way the readings are listed, they are identical to the order in your study Bible. However, when you look at the page number in the right-hand column, you see that the pages are not consecutive. This may seem confusing, so let me explain.

As an example, let’s use the 5th entry under the “Discussions of Biblical Text” list on page viii. The text is Genesis 11:27 – 12:3, which is found on page 41. Take a look at page 41, under the section entitled “Abraham and Sarah,” and you will find the Genesis text listed under the discussions list. It is here that the author wants you to read the text from the Bible in conjunction with the book. This same format will be used throughout the textbook. Thus, it is important that you understand the way the book is designed to interact with the reading from the Old Testament.

It has been my experience when teaching religion classes that use the Bible that many people are not familiar with this book and how it is organized. As noted in the written text in the introduction, our author acquaints the student new to the Bible with an understanding of how to navigate through this book. It will be most helpful to review this section and look up the 2 practice Scriptures at the bottom of the page. Do this until you are comfortable navigating the Bible. Now, this page does not tell you what order the books are in. So you have 2 options. You can either memorize the order of the books, which would be best overall. Or you can use the table of contents in your Bible. That’s not cheating; that’s being a smart student.

Now we are ready to begin our adventure in which we will “encounter ancient voices” by exploring new lands and meeting new people.