POSC 350: POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE BOOK OF GENESIS

Professor Laurence Cooper
Willis 416
x4111

Fall 2009
Office hours: Thurs. 3-5, Fri. 10-12, and by appt.

I. Purpose and Scope

The Bible is not a book of philosophy, nor is it altogether compatible with or accepting of philosophy – at least not as "philosophy" has traditionally been understood. Still less is the Bible a book of *political* philosophy in any ordinary sense. But philosophy, strictly speaking, means nothing more or less than the love of wisdom (*philosophia* [Gk.] = *philia* of *sophia*), and the Bible does claim to answer that desire. And political philosophy is first and last an inquiry into the question of the good life, and the Bible certainly speaks to that question. So this Book that at first appears to lie outside the realm of philosophy offers itself and indeed commends itself to us on the most basic of philosophic grounds. If this is true of the Bible as a whole, it is especially true of Genesis, its first book. Genesis begins with universals (creation, the origins of humanity, the origins of civilization, etc.) and in so doing speaks to the human condition and the basic human questions in their primordial form. Thereafter, with the calling of Abraham (then named Abram) in chapter 12, the text turns to the formation and the story of a particular people. Yet even here the text speaks universally, for the people whose story is told exemplifies a universal human nature, and the insights that can be discerned from its story are applicable, in principle, to all humanity.

In this class we begin with only one presumption – that Genesis is a rich and instructive book from which we stand to learn much. We make no presumption regarding its authorship or status as divine revelation. (Interestingly, the text makes no such claim on its own behalf.) Our whole method will be to try to understand the text on its own terms, a method that is far more demanding than any other precisely because it can't be developed and employed except by our wrestling with the text itself. I expect that students will bring widely divergent attitudes to the text and that all of us, whatever our backgrounds or beliefs, are capable of approaching it openly and in what one of our commentators has aptly called a "wisdom-seeking spirit."

II. Course Requirements

By far the most important requirement is that you read all assigned passages **closely** and **before class**, and **more than once**. Genesis is very easy to read but not easy to read well. The text is extraordinarily compact. Every word counts, and points of great significance are conveyed by the subtlest literary devices. You should therefore give the reading considerable time and attention, and you should pay attention to the translator's notes. Be sure to use the Robert Alter translation, available at the bookstore.

Aside from Genesis itself, I have made available some very valuable scholarly commentaries for your use, two of which will be drawn on regularly in class discussion: *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, by Robert D. Sacks, which is on closed reserve in the Library, and *The*

Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis, by Leon R. Kass, which you should purchase from the bookstore. These commentaries are *highly recommended*. Genesis is brief enough to leave you time for additional reading, but too rich to allow everything to be addressed in class. Sacks' book is a chapter-by-chapter and even line-by-line commentary, so the correspondence between his book and Genesis will always be clear. Kass' book begins as a chapter-by-chapter commentary and then becomes a bit more thematic in organization. You should consult his table of contents to determine which pages to read. A third commentary is also available: Umberto Cassuto's magisterial *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, whose two volumes cover roughly the first half of Genesis (vol.1, *From Adam to Noah*; vol. 2, *From Noah to Abraham*). Cassuto's commentary is the best place to turn for help interpreting particular passages. These books will enrich your encounter with Genesis, but always be sure to read the assigned portion of Genesis, at least twice, before turning to secondary literature.

You will be asked to present a short paper (5 to 7 pages) on a selected portion of the text (chosen by the instructor in accordance with your preference, if possible) and to lead class discussion for a portion of that day's meeting. The short paper will count for 25% of your grade. A twenty-page seminar paper will count for 50% of your grade. The seminar paper will be due on Monday, November 23; paper topics must be approved by the instructor by Friday, November 6. The remaining 25% of your grade will be based on class participation, including your paper presentation. Since this is a seminar, your active and sustained participation is needed and expected.

III. Academic Honesty

Strict standards of academic integrity will be upheld in this class. When you hand in a paper you will be understood to be affirming that you have neither given nor received inappropriate aid. Students who are found to have violated this standard should expect severe sanctions.

IV. Class Schedule

Please note that the following schedule is approximate. We may depart from it if class discussions etc. so require. The numbers refer to chapters of Genesis.

September 15: 1-2

September 17: 2-3

September 22: 4-5

September 24: 6-7

September 29: 8-9

October 1: 10-11

October 6: review

October 8:12-15

October 13: 16-18

October 15: 19-22

October 20: 23-25

October 22: 26-28

October 27: 29-32

October 29: 33-35

November 3: 36-39

November 5: 40-43

November 10: 44-46

November 12: 47-50

November 17: Israel in Egypt—the end of the beginning