

Politics and the Gods (K20.1417)

NYU—Gallatin School
Fall 2009
Thursdays 6:20-9:00
715 Broadway, Room 601

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Course Description:

How is political life related to the divine? In this course, students will explore this question through close readings of classic texts from the ancient world. We shall tackle the question from both ends, asking both what it might mean to have a political life founded theologically and what the possibilities are for a politics that does not orient itself with respect to the divine. We will investigate the political roles of piety, revelation, and divine law, comparing these to notions of a politics rooted in unaided human reason. Additional themes will include: the relationship between poetry and prophecy, the tension between cultural particularity and universal humanity, and the political function of myth. Throughout, emphasis will be on close readings of primary texts.

Required Texts:

The Five Books of Moses: A Translation and Commentary. Translated by Robert Alt r.
New York: W.W. Norton, 2004.

The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories. Edited by Robert B. Strassler. New York:
Pantheon Books, 2007.

The Republic of Plato. Translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1968.

Course Outline:

Session 1 *Introductions*

9/10 Readings: Spinoza, *Political-Theological Treatise* 5:7-9

Session 2 *The Biography of Ancient Israel*

9/17 Readings: (see below)

- *Who is the author of this narrative? What is the basis of the author's authority?*
- *What is your impression of the Israelites after having read the story of their early years?*

Session 3 *Slavery and Redemption*

9/24 Readings: Exodus 1-15

- *What motivates Moses to strike the Egyptian in Exodus 2? Is he justified in doing so?*
- *What is the relationship between Israel's God and the King of Egypt? What role does Moses play in relation to these two?*

Session 4 ***Law: Reception and Disobedience***

10/1 Readings: Exodus 16-34; Numbers 11-14 and 16-17

- *How would you characterize the demands placed on Israel by their god in Exodus? How do they compare to the demands Pharaoh made on them?*
- *Should the Israelites obey the commands of God? Why?*

Session 5 ***Perpetuating the Law***

10/8 Readings: Deuteronomy 1-34

- *Describe the relationship between law and narrative in this book.*
- *What means does Moses employ in his attempt to instill in the people a commitment to the Law?*

Session 6 ***Inquiry and Piety***

10/15 Readings: Herodotus, *The Histories*, I.1-216

- *What does Herodotus set out to accomplish by writing his book? Can you deduce any methodological principles that he employs in his inquiries?*
- *What role does concern about the gods play in the stories Herodotus tells in this book?*

Session 7 ***Human Being and Citizen***

10/22 Readings: Herodotus, *The Histories*, 2.1-98; 3.1-60

- *At 2.2 Herodotus tells the story of Psammetichos' language experiment. What can be deduced from this story about the relationship between human nature and cultural particularity?*
- *In Book 3, Herodotus condemns Cambyses' killing of the Apis bull. What is the basis for his judgment and is he right?*

Session 8 ***Types of Regime***

10/29 Readings: Herodotus, *The Histories*, 3.61-160; 4.1-144

- *Beginning at 3.80, there is a discussion about the best regime. In your opinion, who makes the best case and why?*
- *Compare the laws of any two peoples encountered within the first four books of *The Histories*. What can they tell us about the "national character" of the respective peoples?*

Session 9 ***Universality and Particularity***

11/5 Readings: Herodotus, *The Histories*, 6.48-70, 94-120; 7.1-239

- *What factors contribute to Persian imperial ambitions? What role does the Persian understanding of the divine play in these ambitions to world domination?*
- *What does Demaratos mean (at 7.104) when he says that the Spartans' master is their law, and that they fear it more than Xerxes' subjects fear him? How does fearing one's law differ from fearing a human ruler? How is it related to fearing a god?*

Session 10 ***Piety and the Question of Justice***

11/12 Readings: Plato, *The Republic*, Book I

- *Describe the dramatic setting of the dialogue. How might this contribute the meaning of the work?*
- *Is Thrasymachus' position convincing? Why or why not?*

Session 11 *The City in Speech*

11/19 Readings: Plato, *The Republic*, Books II-IV

- *What is the origin of law according to Glaucon? How does this account compare to other positions we have encountered over the semester?*
- *What is a “noble lie”?*

11/26 No Class

Session 12 *Nomos and Physis*

12/3 Readings: Plato, *The Republic*, Books V-VII

- *At 476d-e, Socrates tries to distinguish knowledge from opinion. What is the difference between these two things? How can one tell the difference between them?*
- *What is a philosopher? Why might there be tension between a philosopher and a city?*

Session 13 *Politics and the Afterlife*

12/10 Readings: Plato, *The Republic*, Books VIII-X

- *Socrates says that there is an “ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy” (10.607b). What is the nature of this fight? Does Socrates’ argument against poetry in Book 10 amount to a decisive victory for philosophy?*
- *Why does Socrates’ account of justice conclude with a myth about the afterlife?*

Grade Breakdown:

Three 4-5 page essays	60%
Three 1-page response papers	15%
One quiz	5%
Participation & engagement	20%

Course Requirements:

Regular attendance is expected. Repeated absences will negatively influence your grade.

All students are required to attend class *with the book* and *having done the reading*. The texts we will be studying this semester are complex and nuanced; “reading” in this context means **re-reading several times**. As Nietzsche puts it in the “Preface” to *The Genealogy of Morals*: “To be sure, one thing is necessary above all if one is to practice reading as an *art* ... something that has been unlearned most thoroughly nowadays ... something for which one has almost to be a cow and in any case *not* a ‘modern man’: *rumination*.”

Students will be required to write three essays over the course of the semester. Each paper should be 4-5 pages, double-spaced. The first paper, on the Torah, will be due Sunday, October 11; the second paper, on Herodotus, will be due Sunday, November 8; the third paper, on Plato, will be due Thursday, December 17. Topics for each paper will

be distributed several days prior to the day they are due. Essays should be submitted by email as a Microsoft Word file, no later than 11:59pm on the relevant Sunday.

In addition, students are required to submit three 1-page response papers over the course of the semester. These papers should respond to one of the prompt questions connected to the reading for the upcoming session. Should you like to address an issue not represented by either prompt, but relevant to the themes of the course, you are free to do so. Though you have the freedom to choose for which three sessions you want to write responses, you must submit at least one response paper by the seventh session (10/22). Papers should be submitted by email, no later than 9am on the Thursday of the relevant session.

There will also be one quiz on the reading for session two on 9/17.

Odds and Ends:

Please, no eating in class. On the other hand, drinking coffee is encouraged.

If you bring a laptop computer to class, please use it for taking notes only. I.e., no checking e-mail, IM-ing, reading blogs, playing video games, uploading photos onto Facebook, etc. Make sure that all cell phones are turned *off* (i.e., not on vibrate).

Incompletes will only be granted in extreme situations.

Don't "disappear" if you are having trouble with the course. Come talk to me and we will figure out a way to get things on track.

Plagiarism will result in your failing the assignment and likely expulsion from the course. DO NOT DO IT. If you have questions as to what constitutes plagiarism, ask.

Reading Assignment for Session 2 (*The Biography of Ancient Israel*):

To become familiar with the narrative portion of the Torah, read quickly through the following chapters. When you get to lists and tables of genealogy don't bother learning the details, but don't skip entirely; at least take note of what they are doing there.

It would be useful to make a brief table of contents or outline of what you are reading, *without going into too much detail*.

You will be quizzed on this material in class on October 17.

Genesis	1-50	(skim the lists in 4, 5, 10, 11, and 46)
Exodus	1-20	
	24	(skim 25-30)
	31-34	
	40	
Numbers	9-14	
	16-17	
	20-25	
	27:12-23	
Deuteronomy	1-11	
	31-34	(skim 32 and 33)