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Course description
Philo of Alexandria saw Moses as the embodiment of four offices: king, lawgiver, priest, and prophet. 18th-century radical Enlightenment philosophers saw in Moses one of the “three impostors” (Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad). Sigmund Freud, “father” of psychoanalysis, deconstructed the biblical Moses tradition as reflective of two completely different figures, one Egyptian, the other Midianite, while German novelist-in-exile Thomas Mann retrieved Moses as one of the founding figures of Western ethics, albeit in form of a fictional character. How do we relate to Moses and to the complex history of reception of this figure and the values or meanings it represents? After two millennia during which western discourse on religion and law was shaped, in part, by wrestling with the Mosaic tradition, does the commanding voice of Sinai still mean something to us and, if so, what does this say about our own place in this tradition?

In this course we will examine the history of reception and the modus vitae embodied by the great figure of Exodus story and Sinaitic legislation and attempt to construe a Moses for our time. The course will draw on a variety of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions and approaches such as biblical Higher Criticism, “mnemohistory” (the history of memory), philosophy, theology, and literary criticism.

Goals: a) experience, by means of close reading of primary sources, the proximity of the major western religious traditions to one another while gaining a subtler view of the interactions and tensions between them; b) gain a sense of the “polyvalence” of symbols, i.e. their change in meaning over time and from author/community to author/community; c) explore affinities and differences between the revealed traditions and philosophical reasoning; d) consider hermeneutical problems such as truth and manifestation, esoteric meaning and exoteric form; e) reflect on and evaluate modern scholarship and popular sentiments as approaches to the pre-modern revealed traditions; e) engage with modern creative literature as attempts to articulate what traces of meaning we may find in something like the biblical Moses figure in an age constituted by historical critique (Spinoza), by the philosophical destruction of all tradition (Nietzsche, Heidegger), by a social-scientific relativization of all values (Weber), and by the demise of authors and texts (Derrida).

As the list of topics and readings makes clear, this seminar allows students to explore not just various texts and traditions but various types of texts and traditions. The Moses figure, ostensibly and in fact the sujet of these readings, is refracted in the radically different approaches represented by the readings we undertake in this class. In this way, the biblical Moses tradition will be deprived of the essential qualities we tend to ascribe to it or, put differently, we will help one another to wean ourselves of assumptions we inevitably bring to the text and to discover it afresh, not as the primary or original text.
(the *Urtext*) but as an original and elusive contribution to a larger pursuit that emerges only in light of the many rereadings and reconstructions that have been produced and continue to be produced. The challenge is to let go of the depicted and focus on the depiction, a point made particularly evident in the libretto of Arnold Schönberg’s opera *Moses and Aaron*, where Moses represents intention and Aaron the inevitable falsification that comes with representation.

Note that this seminar approaches Moses neither from a religious nor from an anti-religious perspective. Traditional sources are not privileged over modern interpretations, nor are modern approaches, such as biblical Higher Criticism, privileged over other approaches. The point of this course is for students to develop and practice the craft of mindful reading, which is the fundamental tool of the work of a humanistic scholar. This is to instill awareness for the precariousness of all traditions and institutions of knowledge (religious and non-religious, historical and contemporary) and for our own role in the production of knowledge.

**Assignments and grading**

Because the readings are from texts representing genres students may not have encountered before it will be necessary for you to take sufficient time to read slowly and carefully and in an environment conducive to concentrated reading. You should leave yourself time not just for the reading but for daydreaming and free associating while reading. Read everything twice. (Forging new neuronal paths requires repetition.) Record your thoughts in a diary. I will collect these diaries once a week and comment on what strikes me as interesting. It is not important to write or submit a lot since I won’t be able to comment on everything. I will grade your diary at the end of the semester and it will account for 30% of the course grade.

Participation in the conversations of the class is essential (30%). Students who feel they cannot speak in front of others should then at least see me individually during office hours to articulate their views and raise questions. I will consider this in assigning your participation grade. Participation needs to be not just engaged and articulate but qualified, i.e., on the basis of your having done the requisite and often dense readings. I will know immediately, and so will you, whether or not you come to class prepared. It also redounds to your credit and constitutes good study habits to show evidence of additional research. I will frequently mention names and topics that will not be covered by the assigned readings and you should make it a habit to follow up such hints on your own. Let me know if you need any guidance in how to conduct such research.

Term paper (40%): In your final paper you will construe a Moses story/interpretation/rendering of your own or critically engage a Moses tradition/interpretation. This can be in form of creative writing, a critical essay, a piece of art or a musical composition accompanied by an interpretive text, or something else. (One of the strongest submissions of this sort submitted by a student was a beautifully executed and well-thought out childrens’ book manuscript with text and drawings that renarrated the Moses story from the perspective of the rod of Aaron.)
Course Books
A translation of the Hebrew Bible. Recommended edition: Jewish Study Bible (Oxford University Press)


Gregory of Nyssa: Life of Moses (Paulist Press 1978)

Jan Assmann, Moses the Egyptian (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998)

Sigmund Freud, Moses and Monotheism (Vintage Books, 1967)

Thomas Mann, The Tables of the Law (out of print; available as pdf on courseinfo and multiple copies in library)

Zora Neal Hurston, Moses, Man of the Mountain (HarperCollins)

Other readings will be made available on the blackboard site for this course or at Mugar or STH reserve.

General rules
Attendance and active participation are essential. Readings must be completed ahead of time. Check blackboard site regularly and look out for announcements and mail from this class in your inbox. Make sure your BU mailbox accepts mail or that your mail is forwarded to an active account. I check email several times a day, except on Saturdays.


COURSE SCHEDULE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

Week One The Birth of a Hero
The story of Moses uses the conventions of a “hero-story,” as we can tell from the story of his birth. Can you think of other, similar birth stories in world literature that suggest an unusual birth as the signal of a heroic career?

Read: Britt, pp. 1-11 (Note that Britt’s Moses works its way “backwards” by beginning with modern film. We will do otherwise and hence won’t be reading his book in sequence. Eventually I would like to discuss his approach to making the topic accessible by organizing the material the way he does.)

Exodus ch. 1-15. The point of this initial reading is to get a sense of plot, character, themes, but also of the literary surface of this text. Please note anything at all that appears
“odd,” irritating or puzzling in this text. Articulate any tacit assumptions made by the text. Consider whether or not Moses undergoes any sort of character development.

Week Two **Plotting Moses**
To get a sense of Moses across the Pentateuch, please read the following passages:

Exodus 16-19, 32-34, Numbers 10:29-14, 20-21, 31, Deuteronomy 1-3, 31-34.

This is not as much reading as it may seem. Read for plot and note just briefly what it is we are omitting by reading for plot. What is the literary character or content of the majority of the text we are skipping?

Read Britt, chapter 5.

Week Three **Difficult texts**
Read Britt, chapters 6-8 (117-184). These chapters are close readings of passages dealing with Deuteronomy 31ff and the death of Moses.

Week Four **Law and representation**
Assuming that the composition of Exodus is purposive and meaningful, what do you make of the combination of law (what kinds of law, how distinguished in kinds of ordinances and in the organization of text) and narrative? Is there a larger point that can be made on the basis of this arrangement? What, do you think, were the ancient authors/arrangers up to?

Read Exodus 20-40

Week Five **Xenophon’s Cyrus and Josephus’s Moses**
We have seen that there are several sides to Moses, to his character as well as to the material associated with him. We will now begin the exploration of the way in which Moses was received in Antiquity and late Antiquity. Picking up from earlier, we return to Moses as a military leader and the founder of a commonwealth. The first of the two readings maps out what may be a parallel case to Moses (the famed Cyrus of Persia, founder of the great Achaemenid empire, as depicted by a student of Socrates, a Greek who had served as a Persian mercenary). The second maps out how Moses was understood by one of the generals of the Jewish army from the First Revolt against Rome (66-74 CE) who became a propagandist for the Flavians who defeated the Jews and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem.

Read: Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus* (selection; pdf on courseinfo or other online or print edition)  
Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* (selections; pdf on courseinfo or other online or print edition; best: Loeb Classic Series)  
Josephus, *Against Apion*, Book I, 13-16, 25-31 (same as above)

Week Six **Philo’s Life of Moses**
Another, perhaps more comprehensive approach is found in Philo of Alexandria. Here more than in the work of Philo’s younger contemporary, Josephus, the idea begins to emerge of Moses as the supreme model of a perfect way of life. Consider Philo’s background or general philosophical orientation as a Platonist and Stoic philosopher. (Look up what this means in Encyclopaedia of Philosophy).

To get a sense of this author, his time, cultural, social and political settings of his writings on Moses and the Pentateuch, and his fundamental significance in western intellectual history and theology, I recommend the article on Philo of Alexandria in the Encyclopedia Judaica.

Read: Philo, *Vita Mosis* (pdf on blackboard or Loeb Classic Seried ed.)

**Week Seven Two Christian Ways of Emulating Moses**
Skipping across the several centuries that it took for orthodox Christianity to emerge, we confront the perceptions of Moses, or the attempt to invoke Moses, to articulate two radically opposite ways of life, both committed to the Christian truth, both devoted to Moses as a model, yet pursuing two radically opposite ideas about the Christian life and what Moses has to teach. Both are elitist and reach for Moses as a standard of perfection.

Read: Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* (selections; pdf on courseinfo)
Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*

**Week Eight Moses and folk piety in late antiquity**
The selections we will be reading this week (from Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* on blackboard, and from the Qur’an (find an on-line or print edition of the Holy Qur’an and look up passages on Moses, using the index. Note: read not just the particular verse but the entire context in which it is found!!!) should be discussed in two ways:
What kind of an image (or multiple images) of Moses is (are) conveyed in Jewish midrashic tradition (i.e., oral traditions of a exegetical, homiletical, or narrative kind)? How does this relate to what we find in the Qur’an? Who or what is Moses in early Islam? How come that what appear to be pious traditions attached to Moses as a prophet deviate from the biblical text in such significant ways?
Further reading: I will recommend, but you an easily find, literature on midrash and on early Islam (history and literature).

**Week Nine Horned and Veiled Moses**
One of the greatly fascinating topics of medieval art is the depiction of Moses with horns. Where does this come from, what did it signify, and what did it come to represent once the original meaning of the horns was forgotten? What is it about that veil?
Read:
Britt, chapter four (pp. 82-116)
Week Ten **Esoteric and Exoteric Moses**
As we see in last week’s chapter by Britt, the image of the veil came to suggest the “veiled” meanings of the text. While “reading otherwise” (i.e., allegory) is an ancient technique, it came to be used in a variety of ways and Moses remained central to the possibility of rereading and to the imagery of a veiled truth. This figure not just has an afterlife of its own but it is frequently reconnected with the question of Moses Egyptian origin. What became of this motif in the western speculative traditions has been described in the provocative book you will be reading for this week.
Read: Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*

Week Eleven **May the true Moses stand up: modern biblical science and the historization of Moses**
Read: Britt, chapter three (pp. 59-81)

Week Twelve **Modern critique of religion and the psychologization of Moses**
Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*

Week Thirteen **Moses Fictions**
Thomas Mann, *The Tables of the Law* (New York, A.A. Knopf, 1945),
Zora Neal Hurston, Moses, *Man of the Mountain*

Britt, chapter one (pp. 13-39).

Week Fourteen **Moses and Aaron**
This opera, an excellent example of twelve tone music, Schönberg captured a side of the Moses story that harks back to our question of law and representation. The work does in music what Mann, a friend and admirer of Schönberg’s, did in his short novel. Listen to and read libretto of Arnold Schoenberg, "Moses and Aaron" (on reserve at Mugar). You will need to listen to this piece of music several times before you can begin to parse its motifs. We will talk about this in class ahead of time and do listening exercises.

Week Fifteen **Moses goes to Hollywood**
Read: Britt, chapter two (pp. 40-58).
"The Ten Commandments" (Cecil B. DeMilles, 1923/1956)
"Prince of Egypt" (Simon Wells and Steve Hickner, 1998)
I suggest we organize a viewing marathon at the Geddes Language Center and use the class time for concluding discussions and work on your papers.

Papers due: first day of final exam period.