

INDIANA UNIVERSITY BLOOMINGTON

The Bible and Race in America

Class info.

Days: Tuesday, Thursday
Time: TBA
Place: TBA
Class URL: TBA

Instructor info.

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Rationale

The cultural history of scriptures in America is inextricably linked to ideas about race. Any serious attempt to understand biblical influences in identity in America, for this reason, demands attention toward race. The very history of studying the Bible (*viz.*, biblical studies), moreover, has itself been indelibly shaped by imperatives of racial identity. The result is a complex of fictive tendencies that are simultaneously inhibiting on the one hand (i.e., obfuscating efforts to understand empirical histories) and productive (generating copious meanings) on the other, for encountering race and the Bible.

Scripture studies has typically involved mining the ancient past to reconstruct the most plausible historical setting within which scriptural texts were first written; recent studies in American religion have devoted necessary attention to the fact that scriptures fundamentally involve cultural histories that are evolving and active long after texts are first written. The emerging area of “book studies,” as exemplum, has made visible the fact that *modern* experiences of texts richly texture and differentiate the experience of religion.

This course aims to provide students with a rigorous assessment of the uses of the Bible and other scriptures to construe meanings about race in America; this history has most frequently involved reading modern race identities into biblical narratives and interpreting American experience as the fulfillment of biblical promise. This course also examines the history of racial power in shaping fundamental methods and assumptions germane to modern biblical studies.

Nature and scope of course

This course is a graduate-level seminar that examines through primary and secondary sources the cultural history of the Bible and ideas about race in America. The course spans the colonial era to the present.

Different sections of the course will concern constructions of race through 19th-century science discourses; uses of the Noah legend; print culture, and biblical studies.

This course will prepare students to understand American theologies of chosenness and divine destiny, racial appropriations of biblical narrative, and the cultural history of attempts to locate racial origins using biblical traditions. Students will examine the myriad ways racing the Bible and biblicizing race have been integral to histories of power in America.

Important theoretical concerns include theories of textuality, the novelty of modern strategies of identification, collective memory, and cultural theoretical approaches to scripture studies.

I have arranged this syllabus with a graduate audience in mind. Such a course would fulfill requirements for master and doctoral-level elective coursework in a department of Religious Studies. I think the course would be ideal for graduate students in American Studies as well. The syllabus is easily adapted into an undergraduate course by paring down the reading.

The research component of this course is designed to aid students in the process of writing and rewriting in response to critical feedback on their research topic. Two papers are required. The first is graded and returned with extensive written feedback from the instructor. The second paper, also graded of course, is an extended revision of the first, based on continued research and consultation with the professor during the semester. Each student will also be required to exchange the first paper with a colleague in the seminar to get feedback from peers.

A word about structure. I have arranged the course primarily based on a chronology of primary sources, but not purely. As is evident, some themes or sections draw on a chronological range of primary sources. By taking this approach, I have tried to make visible important diachronic trends. At the same time, I have sought to balance this with attention to shifts and discontinuities that occur over time (e.g., slavery ceases to be of theological significance

by the end of the nineteenth century; racial audiences continue to be enamored of finding themselves in the Bible throughout American history).

Required texts (excluding reserve readings)

Barkun, Michael. *Religion and the Racist Right: Origins of the Christian Identity Movement*. Rev. ed. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Brown, Candy Gunther. *The Word in the World: Evangelical Publishing, Writing, and Reading in America, 1789–1880*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Haynes, Stephen. *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Goldschmidt, Henry. *Race and Religion among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006.

Johnson, Sylvester A. *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Kelley, Shawn. *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology, and the Formation of Biblical Scholarship*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Prentiss, Craig, ed. *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity*. New York: New York University Press, 2003.

Schwartz, Regina. *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Smedley, Audrey. *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993.

ORAL PRESENTATION

Every participant in the course is required to lead at least two (2) discussions during the semester. The discussant, in preparation, should note salient themes, conflicts, or arguments and **must** prepare either an outline or a discursive text to guide the presentation, a copy of which is to be given to the instructor on the day of the presentation. The presentation should not exceed 15 minutes in duration (20 minutes when two persons co-present). There is no need to recapitulate every detail—everyone will have already done the reading. You are, rather, expected to note major issues and to proffer evocative analysis. And you are asked to *discuss your own response* to specific ideas from the material. The presentation, in other words, should feature your analysis—not repetition—of the assigned reading. Remember that everyone is responsible for having completed all required selections every class session; the person leading the discussion is a facilitator, not a prop.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Each student will be responsible for one research project that will culminate in two (2) separate but related papers. The research project must identify some theme in American religion related to the course and must be based on primary research in order to develop an articulate study that addresses this theme. **The first paper** must be 8–10 pages (at least 8) in length. This paper will constitute a brief but complete treatment of the topic. The paper is due by Week 7.

The second paper shall build upon the work of the first to effect a more in-depth exposition of the same topic. This second submission should also incorporate critical feedback received from the first. The length shall be 15–20 pages (15 pages minimum). The paper is due by Week 14.

REQUIRED READING SCHEDULE
Part I

The first three weeks of this course examine the novelty of race and the status of the Bible as a modern book. The documentary *Race* approaches race identity as an historical phenomenon emerging in the early modern period and deriving from colonial encounters. The documentary emphasizes both theoretical and anecdotal approaches to demonstrating the arbitrary nature of racial taxonomy. The powerful social influence of race for interpersonal and institutional contexts is a point of focus. Students are able to recognize that despite its fictive, arbitrary construction, race as a social force is very real and consequential.

Brown's study emphasizes the material culture of American biblical textuality. Brown explains the technologies of production and the semiotics and sociology of representing the Bible as both a sacred symbol and as an inherently sacred object.

Smedley examines the history of ideas about race in the America. She devotes attention to the implications of recent genetic studies and paleo-anthropology, which have overturned older conceptions of race as a biologically based reality to indicate instead that race is a socially constructed system of hierarchical identification.

The essay by Braude examines the legacy of the Noah legend in the West. This legend reverberates continuously throughout American history and throughout this course syllabus. Braude is keenly attentive to the style of imagining racial origins that inheres to modern racial thought.

Schiebinger's article is a clear, compelling assessment of the semiotic and intellectual ties that have rendered race partly a gender concept. Students are able to gain a sense of the history of scientific attempts to read gender as a form of race and vice versa (e.g., Indians and Africans as feminine races, women as "colored" by their gender—caricatured as irrational and essentially biological beings, like 'inferior' races).

John Foxe's work is here because it became such a common text in colonial American households and promoted the style of reading Protestant identity as a rescued form of primitive Christianity. Anglo-Saxon chosenness is a central them in Foxe's text.

My aim here is to unsettle an uncritical familiarity with the Bible and with race and to emphasize their function as potent matrices for producing meanings about identity, the past and future, and America. Students should recognize that the Bible functions partly as an implement in the task of world-making and imagining race.

Week 1

 Introductory lecture, discussion

 *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 2003) [Documentary film]

Week 2

 John Foxe, *Fox's Book of Martyrs, or, The Acts and Monuments of the Christian Church* (1563; reprint, Philadelphia: J. & J.L. Gihon, 1813) [Excerpt, Reserve Reading]

 Benjamin Braude, "The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (January 1997): 103-142. [Reserve Reading]

 Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World*

Week 3

 Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America*, chs. 1–8

 Londa Schiebinger, "The Anatomy of Difference: Race and Sex in Eighteenth-Century Science," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23, no. 4, Special Issue: The Politics of Difference (summer 1990): 387-405. [Reserve Reading]

Part II

This section of the course undertakes a vigorous assessment of primary source materials, in synthesis with secondary studies of race and scriptures in America. Weeks 4 and 5 provide some sense of the historical context that framed attempts to interpret identity in America and to conceptualize history as the unfolding of a biblical drama through fulfillment of racial destinies.

This section also highlights the extent to which the ‘Ten Lost Tribes of Israel’ becomes a thematic refrain when describing origins of Native Americans (Thorowgood, Edwards). Equiano’s narrative, in a similar, poignantly exemplifies the colonial conundrum of making sense of ethnic histories by using the Bible as a world history book.

Stannard’s study of genocide against Native Americans demonstrates the extent to which religious hatred and racism made genocide intelligible as a broad underlying context for imagining American identity. McLoughlin, on the other hand, shows one instance of the Noah myth plied to the service of representing Indians (“red peoples”) as primal peoples.

Week 4

- 📖 Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1791) [Excerpt, Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist the Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity* (Boston : Printed by B. Green, 1706) [Excerpt, Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Jonathan Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 5 (1817; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, 1968) [Excerpt, Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America*, chs. 9–13

Week 5

- 📖 Abiel Abbot, *Traits of Resemblance in the People of the United States of America to Ancient Israel* (Haverhill, MA: Moore & Stebbins, 1799) [Excerpt, Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Thomas Thorowgood, *Jews in America* (London: H. Brome, 1660) [Excerpt, Reserve Reading]
- 📖 William McLoughlin, “The First Man was Red: Cherokee Responses to the Debate Over Indian Origins, 1760-1860,” *American Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (June 1989): 243–264. [Reserve Reading]
- 📖 David Stannard, *The American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) [Excerpt, Reserve Reading]

Part III

Slavery was among the most extensively and perduringly debated issues of theological and legal consequence in American history. Weeks 6 and 7 combine analysis of slavery apologetics and racial historiography of the nineteenth century.

Haynes’ study provides a nuanced examination of the history of attempts to leverage the Noah legend to make sense of race and slavery (Cartwright, Saffin, Schaff). Johnson’s study emphasizes the overwhelming significance that the Noah legend held for claims about racial origins, even more so than about the moral status of slavery. In this scheme, history functions as a canonical concept. African Americans fought to find their way into the canon, even at the cost of demeaning Africa as evil.

Pennington’s *Textbook* is a veritable genealogy of the heathen. This primary source by Pennington exemplifies the narrative strategies of scripturalizing that represented Africans as primal creators of polytheism and moral decadence.

Week 6

- 📖 Samuel Cartwright, “Slavery in the Light of Ethnology,” in *Cotton is King, and Other Pro-Slavery Arguments; Comprising the Writings of Hammond, Harper, Christy, Stringfellow, Hodge, Bledsoe, and Cartwright, on This Important Subject*, ed. E. N. Elliot (Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbot and Loomis, 1860) [Reserve Reading]
- 📖 John Saffin, *A Brief and Candid Answer...* [Excerpt, Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Philip Schaff, *Slavery and the Bible: A Tract for the Times* (Chambersburg, PA: M. Kieffer and Co[.]’s Caloric Printing Press, 1861) [Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Stephen Haynes, *Noah’s Curse*

Week 7

- 📖 James W. C. Pennington, *A Textbook of the Origin and History of the Colored People* (1841; reprint, Detroit, MI: Negro History Press, 1969) [Reserve Reading]
- 📖 James Theodore Holly, “The Divine Plan of Human Redemption in Its Ethnological Development.’ A.M.E. Church Review 1 (October 1884): 79–85 [Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Benjamin Tanner, *The Descent of the Negro; Reply to Rev. Drs. J.H. Vincent, J.M. Freeman and J.H. Hurlbut* (Philadelphia, PA: A.M.E. Publishing House, 1898) [Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Sylvester Johnson, *Myth of Ham*

Part IV

In this section, Weeks 8 and 9, I attempt to make visible the role that sacred texts play in American imaginings of biblical identity by further clarifying the imperatives that drove Americans to find themselves in the Bible. Explicit forms of American Judaisms feature in this section as well.

The essay by Prentiss examines the theology of racial origins among the Latter Day Saints as part and parcel of mainstream American sensibilities about scriptures and race. By reading scriptures that are indigenous to America (*Book of Mormon*), students should begin to understand scripture as human activity derived through collective strategies of inscribing identity and signifying sacrality. Shipp’s essay further highlights the recurring issue of having history and imagining ancient identities for American selves. This primitivist orientation requires a rejection of empirical history—Shipp terms this historylessness.

Schwartz’s assessment of chosenness and its noetic economy of scarcity offers much explanation toward understanding the theology of Mormonism as an example of American ideas about destiny, conflict, and peoplehood.

The relationship between narrative—*qua* telling a people’s story—and identity is sharpened by Hernandez’s discussion of such. Hernandez also critiques the problems produced by using the Bible to impose ancient biblical identities upon first peoples of America (see Week 5). Hernandez’s essay is especially useful here as it elucidates the function of *narrating* identity as a practice of ethnogenesis.

Neusner’s essay explains the complexity of American Jewish identity as both ethnic and religious. Neusner’s discussion is especially helpful for providing students with a succinct analysis of the intricacy of racial/ethnic/religious identity.

The theology of the Hebrew Israelites is a vivid example of biblical thinking about racial origins in modern America. Eisen examines the phenomenology of white American Jewish identity within the broader scope of American cultural currents.

Goldschmidt’s is a theoretically sophisticated ethnography of Judaisms in New York City. Goldschmidt proffers an unparalleled assessment of Jewish identity that takes seriously the American inflections of racial identity and the vigorous imperatives of belief in chosenness.

Week 8

- 📖 Craig Prentiss, “ ‘Loathsome Unto Thy People’: The Latter-Day Saints and Racial Categorization” in *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity*
- 📖 *The Book of Mormon*, Introduction, 2 Nephi 1-5 [Reserve reading]
- 📖 Nimachia Hernandez, “Indigenous Identity and Story: The Telling of Our Part in the Sacred Homeland,” in *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity*
- 📖 Jan Shipps, “The Genesis of Mormonism” in *Religion and American Culture*, ed. David Hackett (New York: Routledge, 1995) [Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*

Week 9

- 📖 Jacob Neusner, “Jew and Judaist, Ethnic and Religious: How They Mix in America” in *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity*
- 📖 Hebrew Israelites, “The Biblical Hebrew Heritage Of Blacks In The Americas” [http://www.hebrewisraelites.org/introduction_to.htm] [Excerpt, Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Arnold Eisen, *The Chosen People in America: A Study in Jewish Religious Ideology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983) [Excerpt, Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Henry Goldschmidt, *Race and Religion among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights*

Part V

Examining white social identity is important to any serious study of race. As race theorists have generally noted, whiteness typically performs as the unspoken center in a sphere of racial meanings. This section, comprising Weeks 10 and 11, assesses the production of whiteness (*as primordial*) and meanings about chosenness, white American destiny, and the Bible by examining the work of influential scientists/ethnologists (Nott and Gliddon) and theologians (Payne and Strong) of the 1800s. Contemporary ideas are keyed here as well, particularly as attested through the influence of the white supremacist theology of the Kingdom Identity movement.

Primary sources are paired with theoretical studies of white social identity (Du Bois, Harvey, Barkun).

Week 10

- 📖 Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon, *Types of Mankind* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, Grambo, and Co., 1854) [Excerpt, Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Buckner Payne, *The Negro: What is His Ethnological Status?* 2d ed. (Cincinnati, OH: n.p., 1867) [Excerpt, Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Josiah Strong, *Our Country* (1891; reprint, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963) [Excerpt, Reserve Reading]

Week 11

- 📖 W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folk” in *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (1920; reprint, Millwood, N.Y. : Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1975) [Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Kingdom Identity Ministries, “Doctrinal Statement of Beliefs” [<http://www.kingidentity.com/doctrine.htm>]
- 📖 Jennifer Harvey, “The (Im)moral Origins of White U.S.-American Identity: Native/African/English, Savage/Heathen/Christian,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59, nos. 1-2 (2005): 79-113.
- 📖 Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*

Part VI

This section examines the cultural history of race and biblical scholarship by pointing to attempts to locate Western origins in Biblical times based on a modern history strong ideas of anti-Semitism, anti-blackness, and violent performances of white identity.

The use of excerpts from Bible commentaries (*viz.*, Jenks's adumbration of Matthew Henry) is meant to demonstrate the extensive intertextuality common among interlocutors of race and scriptures (especially from the 18th and 19th centuries, but also currently) that has generated brazen anachronisms. One point here is that when modern people look at ancient texts, what they find is their own modern reflection.

Whitelam's study critically assesses the role of twentieth-century biblical studies in presenting ancient Israelites as white Westerners surrounded by villainous indigenous peoples, fighting to preserve the pristine nature of their Western religion against the decadence of Canaanites with an inferior culture.

Kelley's insightful study of anti-Semitism explains, for instance, how Jews were the intimate racial other in Europe, and that American scripture studies have carried with remarkable consistency the intellectual strategies of alterity modeled by Hegel, Baur, Heidegger, etc.—their ideas have been foundational to American biblical scholarship. One result is the broadly familiar concept of an American Jesus who repudiates Judaism (*i.e.*, his own religion).

Week 12

📖 Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917)

[Excerpts (from Genesis, Joshua, Revelation), Reserve Reading]

📖 William Jenks, ed., *The Comprehensive Commentary on the Holy Bible*, vol. 1, *Genesis through Judges* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1844) [Excerpts (from Genesis and Revelation), Reserve Reading]

📖 Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus*, chs. 1, 2, 3

📖 Keith Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel* chs. 1, 2, 4 [Reserve Reading]

Part VII

This final section of the course also examines the power of visual media in the American pageant of biblical identification. A variety of images from (mostly contemporary) illustrated Bible story books provide examples of black slaves held in bondage by white owners (although ancient slavery was not determined by color or 'race'); Israelites, angels, heroes as Caucasian, in contrast to dark-skinned villains, etc. Devisse's work provides a history of medieval and early modern art that literally demonized blacks (*e.g.*, Negroid imps of Satan).

Goldenberg's study of color and ethnicity among the dark-skinned inhabitants of ancient Palestine points to the irony of the classic American strategy of crafting the Bible as a white-skinned history book. *The Ten Commandments* stands as a film classic in this tradition.

Goldenberg also demonstrates the fallacy of attributing modern racial attitudes to ancient texts (*e.g.*, the Noah legend certainly involves hateful slander against 'Canaanites', but its writers would be clueless about modern race categories).

Felder's African Heritage Study Bible provides an example of racial historiography in African American Christian theology; the Bible becomes a means of accessing an ancient African past. Once again, modern identities trump ancient ones, and here specifically African religions become invisible or non-existent in the scope of biblical drama.

Week 13

📖 Jean Devisse, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 2, *From the Early Christian Era to the Age of Discovery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976)

[Excerpt, Reserve Reading]

📖 Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus*, chs. 4, 5, 6

Week 14

- 📖 David Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham* [Reserve Reading]
- 🎬 *The Ten Commandments* (Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 1956)
- 📖 Sumiko Higashi, "Touring the Orient with Lafcadio Hearn and Cecil B. DeMille: Highbrow Versus Lowbrow in a Consumer Culture," in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996) [Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Judith Weisenfeld, "'For the Cause of Mankind': The Bible, Racial Uplift, and Early Race Movies," in *African Americans and the Bible*, ed. Vincent Wimbush (New York: Continuum, 2001) [Reserve Reading]
- 📖 Cain Hope Felder, ed., *The Original African Heritage Study Bible* (Iowa Falls: World Publishing, 2005) [Excerpt, Reserve Reading]