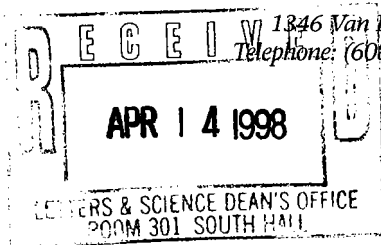
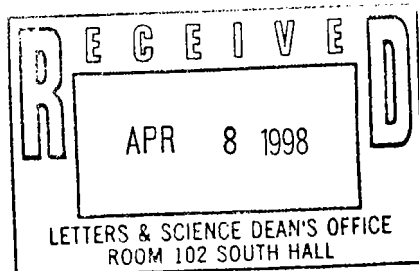


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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON  
DEPARTMENT OF HEBREW & SEMITIC STUDIES



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Phillip Certain, Dean  
College of Letters and Science  
UW

April 6, 1998

Dear Phil:

Enclosed is the Hebrew Department's Self-Assessment. This year we studied the graduate programs. Next year we will investigate the Modern Hebrew programs. The Self-Assessment Committee was chaired by Assistant Professor Cynthia Miller, who wrote the draft. The document was approved by the faculty on March 26, 1998.

Sincerely,

Michael V. Fox  
Chairman

**Self-Assessment of the Graduate Program**  
Department of Hebrew and Semitic Studies  
3 April 1998

**Description of Programs**

The Department of Hebrew and Semitic Studies offers two majors: the Undergraduate Modern Hebrew Program and the Graduate Program. While the overall mission of the Department is to advance the knowledge of Hebrew language and literature and of Jewish culture generally, the different aspects and levels of each of the programs posit different goals and objectives and therefore require different approaches to the assessment plan. Therefore, this year (1997-1998) we are assessing the Graduate Program only; next year we will assess the Undergraduate Program.

**Educational Goals and Objectives**

The following are the educational goals for a student in the M.A. program:

1. The ability to read the biblical text with good comprehension and fair fluency.
2. The ability to parse all standard forms in Biblical Hebrew.
3. The ability to use a cognate Semitic language for enhancing the understanding of Biblical Hebrew and for reading documents from the ancient Near East.
4. An understanding of critical scholarly methodology in Bible studies.
5. An introductory understanding of the history and culture of ancient Israel.

The following are the educational goals for a student in the Ph.D. program, *in addition to the above*:

1. The ability to criticize and evaluate modern scholarship
2. The ability to read the biblical text with a high degree of comprehension and fluency. The comprehension should be on a higher *analytical* level.
3. The ability to parse all forms of Biblical Hebrew and to explain complex syntactic constructions in terms of modern historical methods.
4. The knowledge of three cognate Semitic languages (including the one studied for the M.A.).
5. The ability to read the ancient translations of the biblical text, especially the Greek, and to use them in a sophisticated manner in text criticism and the study of the history of interpretation.
6. An acquaintance with current methodologies and perspectives in Bible Studies.
7. An ability to read non-biblical classical Hebrew texts, esp. the Dead Sea Scrolls.
8. An understanding of ancient post-biblical Jewish literature, particularly Hellenistic literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls, including an idea of their contents and problematics.
9. The ability to plan and execute an independent research project and write it in clear form and persuasive argumentation in a dissertation.

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## Tools of Assessment

Assessment of the Graduate Program proceeded using (1) the written M.A. and Ph.D. exams of the last two years; and (2) Postgraduate questionnaire sent to all recent graduates. Moreover, a draft of this report has been sent to all current graduate students for their comments and it already has their support.

### 1. M.A. and Ph.D. exams

The written M.A. exams include the following language components: (1) translation of Biblical Hebrew passages (including sight passages); (2) parsing of Hebrew verbal forms; (3) composition into Hebrew. They also include substantial essay questions concerning critical scholarly methodologies in the study of the Bible and questions concerning the history and culture of ancient Israel.

The written Ph.D. exams include the following language components: (1) translation and analysis of Biblical Hebrew passages (including sight passages); (2) parsing of Hebrew verbal forms; (3) syntactic analysis of complex constructions; (4) translation of three cognate Semitic languages [including the one studied at the M.A. level]; (5) translation of Septuagintal Greek and demonstration of its use in textual criticism; (6) translation of non-biblical, classical Hebrew texts, especially the Dead Sea Scrolls. The exams also include essay questions on the following areas: (1) current methodologies and perspectives in biblical studies; (2) the contents and problematics of ancient post-Biblical Jewish literature, especially Hellenistic literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Four individuals have taken the M.A. exams during the last two years. Eight individuals have taken the Ph.D. exams. The exams evidenced a high level of competence in the skills required by the program. The stringent academic standards of the department are particularly evident in that an individual who does not perform at acceptable levels is required to re-take the exam in whole or part.

Although on the whole we are extremely pleased with the achievements of our graduate students as evidenced on their exams, there are three areas in which we see a need for improvement.

First, it is crucial that our students fit the texts that they are reading within the historical context of ancient Israel. A number of the essay questions in which students were asked either to provide an overview of the history of ancient Israel or to situate a particular text within its historical timeframe were weak. This deficiency is largely due to the fact that we do not have a faculty member (either in our department or in History) who can teach an introductory course on the history of the ancient Near East or of ancient Israel. This is a pressing need and one which our graduates frequently mentioned on their questionnaires (see below).

Second (and related to the first), we note that our students are not as familiar with the archaeological evidence for life and culture in ancient Israel as they should be. We plan to provide a more structured reading assignments on archaeology to assist students in preparing for the exams. While we recognize that it is impossible for us to have a full-time archaeologist as a member of our faculty, we hope to find ways to continue to engage a lecturer on a regular basis (one course every two years) so that we can offer our introductory course on Biblical Archaeology.

Third, the fact that some students are required to re-take the Hebrew grammar and syntax portions of their M.A. exams demonstrates the high standards of our program. We have observed that a small number of students are not achieving the high levels of reading fluency and solid grammatical knowledge that we demand *early* in their graduate programs. We intend to remedy this problem in two ways. First, we will focus greater attention on this area at the beginning of the graduate experience, though additional morphology assignments for graduate students in HEB 323-324. Second, we will investigate the value and mechanics of a proficiency/placement exam in Hebrew prior to the M.A. exams.

## 2. Postgraduation Questionnaire

A questionnaire was sent to recipients of graduate degrees over the last three years. This includes current Ph.D. students who received an M.A. here. The following excerpts and summarizes the responses. Eight responses were received. The entire set of questionnaires is on file and available.

In addition, the graduate faculty met with the grad students and went over some of these issues informally. Their responses are indicated in brackets.

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### *QUESTIONNAIRE TO RECENT PHD AND MA RECIPIENTS*

*The Hebrew Department would appreciate your taking the time to answer these questions, in order to help us improve our graduate program. Given your experience of the program and your present distance from it, you should be well able to assess the program objectively and suggest changes. A copy of the most recent graduate program information is enclosed. We would also like to hear about your current work, achievements, and publications.*

*With best wishes,*

*Michael V. Fox  
Graduate Advisor*

1. *Should the course requirements for the MA or PhD programs be reduced? Increased? How?*

stay the same: 5

[most current grad students agree]

One recommended reducing cognate language requirement, one recommended increases on the PhD level

2. *Given the constraints of our staffing, what courses should be substituted for current offerings, regularly or on occasion?*

Courses in ancient Near Eastern history and religions. 2

[Everyone agrees that these requirements would be desirable, if the courses were offered]

Some respondents wrote that more flexibility would be desirable, to allow students to take courses in religious studies or Jewish studies.

3. *Was the program overall too demanding? Too easy?*

rigorous but right: 7

increase: 1

"I feel that the program is very demanding, that that's exactly how I wanted it ..."

[This was the consensus of the current students. One said that he came here precisely because of the rigor of our program.]

4. *What requirements should be reduced? Increased?*

Suggestions included the following:

Poetry course should be taught separately from the advanced text course, with which it is currently merged.

The need for history and archeology courses was emphasized.

There was satisfaction with the reading lists, but some specific recommendations were made pertaining the reading lists, and some of them have been incorporated.

5. *What lacks in your own knowledge did you discover since graduation that you feel could be supplied by changes in the curriculum?*

answers overlapped with the above comments

need for course in historical books/historiography

One suggested a new-student orientation (which we will undertake as of next fall).

Some criticisms about the Advanced Hebrew grammar course, referring to the period prior to the hiring of Prof. Miller.

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6. *How well did your graduate studies educate you as a scholar of Bible and Biblical Hebrew?*

All respondents were very positive. Comments included:

"Extremely well. I have published a dozen articles and co-edited a book."

"Very well"

"Studies here are giving me an excellent grounding in Semitics and Hebrew Bible,..."

"Since leaving, I have come to be very impressed with the scope of the UW program. It gave me a very strong background in Hebrew... (from a graduate of the M.A. program, now a Harvard Ph.D. student)

7. *Further comments appreciated:*

(some incorporated in the above)

"For me lack of finances and lack of preparation for the dissertation were the largest drawbacks of an otherwise great Hebrew and Semitic Studies program."

"I have very fond memories of 'the department'. M. Fox did a large amount of mentoring (whether he realized it or not) on critical thinking, problem solving, research strategies, etc., as well as how to write/communicate effectively. I appreciated this more than any course content."

One wanted to see more preparation for dissertation writing during the course-study stage and closer integration between dissertations and professors' own research, "on the model of the hard sciences."

*In addition, we'd like you to bring us up to date on your activities: employment, publications, plans, etc.*

The respondents who answered this question indicate that they are primarily involved in higher education as teachers and/or administrators. Two respondents with an M.A. from our program are currently completing a Ph.D. at Harvard. The remainder of the respondents are graduate students (M.A./Ph.D.) in our department.

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**Faculty Response to the Results of the Questionnaire:**

We cannot help being gratified by the satisfaction expressed by students past and present.

We are incorporating some of the suggestions, e.g. changes in the reading lists, introduction of an incoming student orientation, and greater preparation for dissertation work in the seminars.

The respondents' and current students' major criticisms are shared by the faculty, above all the gaps in courses in the history of Israel and the ancient Near East. We have little hope of supplying this in our department, but if the History Department were to offer a course in ancient history, we would integrate it into our program.

As for the request for greater flexibility and breadth: Developments in the Jewish Studies program may make something of this sort feasible in the next few years.

**3. Overall Comments**

Although we are extremely pleased with our graduate program as a whole, we are anxious to improve it in every way that we can. In conclusion, we make the following overall comments concerning deficiencies and recommendations.

First, our students enter the graduate program with widely differing backgrounds. Their undergraduate degrees are rarely in Hebrew or related fields. Some have master's degrees from divinity schools; others do not. We therefore see the critical need for a general orientation to the discipline and to the graduate study of Hebrew. We therefore propose that we offer a one-hour per week orientation course to be team taught by the faculty as an overload.

Second, our students have virtually no opportunity to study rabbinic texts. We are pleased that a solution is on the horizon, in the form of a new appointment in 2000 in Classical Judaism. All of our Ph.D. level students will be required to take at least one course in rabbinic texts. Also, we expect the new medievalist to teach a course in medieval Bible commentaries.

Third, we note that our sequence of text courses concentrate on poetic texts (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Job). The narrative texts in the Bible are, however, also critical. We hope to partially remedy this lack by offering a seminar on the literary features of narrative texts on a regular basis, within our current cycle of graduate seminar topics.

Fourth, it is critical that our students be able to take courses in the history and archaeology of ancient Israel and the Near East. We believe that our hands are tied by not having regular funding to hire our lecturer in archaeology. If a course on the history of the ancient Near East was offered in the History Department, we would require our graduate students to take it.

Fifth, we plan to concentrate even more heavily on a rigorous and thorough knowledge of Hebrew morphology and syntax in the earliest stages of the graduate experience. We are also placing greater emphasis on a thorough and precise knowledge of the cognate Northwest Semitic languages (especially Ugaritic and the Canaanite dialects).

*Approved by the faculty of the Department of Hebrew and Semitic Studies on March 26, 1998.*