

Book Review

BY CATHY DUFFY

This is the first volume of an ambitious project to create a user-friendly, but high-caliber academic curriculum for a Christian classical education for junior and senior high. The first volume is intended for seventh grade but would seem a fitting starting place for high school students who have little to no background in classical education.

Primary reading material includes titles from the Great Books: *Aeschylus I, Codes of*

Hammurabi & Moses, Gilgamesh, Histories by Herodotus, Odyssey of Homer, Plutarch Vol. 1, Early History of Rome (Livy), Theban Trilogy, Last Days of Socrates, Twelve Caesars (Suetonius), and Sophocles I. These core books should definitely be required reading.

Secondary books and readings are from Scripture as well as more modern fiction and non-fiction. Examples of the secondary titles are *Till We Have Faces; The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (and other *Narnia* titles); books of the Bible such as Isaiah and Jeremiah; *The Unaborted Socrates, The Eagle of the Ninth, and The Holiness of God.* These “modern” books are critical to balance and complete ideas raised in the traditional Great Books, although students need not read every one of them.

According to the editors, “The goal or destination of this course is to learn to reason well and communicate winsomely” (p. 3). Further, “this program aims to cultivate and produce students who are culturally literate” (p.4).

To that end, the book provides background and thought-provoking material for students to read before the Great Books reading assignment. Each of these sections is written by an author familiar with the primary reading. For example, Douglas Wilson writes the sections on *The Odyssey, Aeneid*, and the books

from the *Chronicles of Narnia*, while Peter Leithart covers some of the biblical books, Ben Merkle writes on the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and Jared Miller does *Julius Caesar*. Each of these contributions follows a similar format with information about the author and con-

Mesopotamian artifacts if possible. After this first session, students begin reading the first section of the *Code of Hammurabi*.

Session II: Activity puts students to work as jurists. They are given three cases with the assignment to judge them according to the *Code of Hammurabi* and then according to the Bible. Options are given for classroom groups or students working independently. When this is finished, students con-

tinue reading the next section of the *Code*.

Session III: Recitation has a series of comprehension questions then a “lateral thinking” group of questions for discussion or short essay responses. An optional activity suggests that students draw up their own legal code for their house rules. Students then read the rest of the *Code*.

Session IV: Discussion presents a number of questions that really are best handled via discussion. Questions such as “What do laws have to do with justice?” and “How is justice understood in our culture?” lead students through a somewhat logical progression of thought as they deal with the key ideas. An essay assignment that draws on responses to these questions follows.

Session V: Activity repeats the assignment of cases, with three new cases for students to judge according to the *Code* and to the Bible.

Evaluation questions conclude the lessons on the *Code*. Some questions require one or two sentence answers while others require one or two paragraphs.

Parents will need to decide how many of the questions should be answered in writing and how many handled by discussion. It is possible for a student to work independently through most of the material, but the fourth session really would be much better with

Omnibus I: Biblical and Classical Civilizations

Edited by Douglas Wilson and G. Tyler Fischer
Lancaster, PA: Veritas Press, 2005, 605 pages, \$75 Student text

text, the significance of the work, the main characters, summary and setting, and worldview.

Since students are guided through this study, the worldview of the authors is very important. The editors explain in the preface, “The worldview we hold and from which we write is distinctly protestant and best summarized in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.” They graciously go on to say, “We encourage you to become familiar with the material your students will be covering in this program in order to avoid problems where you might differ with us on these matters” (p. xi).

Following this preliminary material in the text are “sessions” that lead students through both the preliminary reading and the Great Books themselves as they might be covered in a classroom setting. These vary in number and content depending upon the Great Book to be studied. Here’s an example of how it works for the *Code of Hammurabi*:

Session I: Prelude begins with “Questions to Consider” that students are to work through after they have read the preliminary material. These are thought-provoking questions such as “Why are laws necessary? How do we know when laws are just?” These questions are followed by some comprehension questions and an optional activity to visit an archaeology museum for a first hand look at

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guided discussion. Also, if students have to write out all their answers, it might be a prohibitive amount of writing for some students.

A timeline at the back of the book helps students keep the various readings in historical context. The *Veritas Press Bible Cards* and *History Cards* might also be helpful aids as students work through many of the readings.

The CD that comes packaged in the back of the text contains the complete textbook as PDF files. However, answers to questions and notes for discussions are inserted on the CD versions.

In addition, the CD has extras for the teacher: lesson plans, midterm and final exams for each semester plus answer keys, a map of Narnia (nine pages that you will need to print out and put together yourself), an extra short story, a Narnian game (four pages to print and put together as a game board), plus grading helps described below. The answers provided on the CD will likely be the crucial factor in making this course practical for most parents to teach. Nevertheless, most of the discussions will require some familiarity with the readings themselves.

This is a humanities course, primarily covering history, theology, and literature. A chart at

the back of the book shows how much each of the selected readings is weighted toward each of the three disciplines. This helps you keep a balance between the disciplines if you skip some of the readings. If students read all the primary books, they will have the strongest weighting in the area of history. Most of the secondary readings are weighted more toward theology and literature.

On the CD there is a PDF file explaining how to calculate grades for each subject area in relation to each reading and its assignments. It really is quite complex, so the publisher has made it easier by adding an Excel file that will automatically perform the calculations for you for each student. While it isn't absolutely necessary that you use the Excel file, I suspect it will be so helpful that some might purchase Excel simply for that purpose.

Even though *Omnibus I* is suggested for seventh graders, a ninth grader completing the course (including a significant number of secondary readings) should probably be awarded a unit each in history, theology, and literature. Since there are so many possible writing assignments, including lengthy essays, this course might also meet the composition/grammar requirement depending how those

assignments are handled.

Illustrations of classical art, architecture, and sculpture throughout the text might prompt you to expand into coverage of art appreciation. The editors suggest two reference books that should be helpful resources through the entire curricula: *Western Civilization* by Jackson Spielvogel (Wadsworth/Thomson Learning) and *History of Art for Young People* by H.W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson (Harry N. Abrams, Inc.). The latter book will provide more than enough material to create an art appreciation course.

The price might seem high at first glance, but this is a beautiful, hardcover, full-color 605-page textbook with many illustrations from art and architecture. The editors have selected experts to write each of the sections to achieve a high level of scholarship. The course is worked out in such thorough detail that I really believe it will be possible for parents without a classical background to teach it well. While students might get by working independently, it will be far better if parents also read the material and participate in discussions with their teens. Parents who do so will be acquiring an excellent education for themselves in the process.

Cathy Duffy is best known as a curriculum specialist. As the author of the two-volume Christian Home Educators' Curriculum Manual (Elementary Grades and Junior/Senior High) she researches curriculum and methodology for all subjects and all grade levels. Her latest book narrows her recommendations down to the Top 100 Picks for Homeschooling Curriculum (published by Broadman & Holman in February 2005).

In addition to teaching her own sons all the way through high school, she has taught numerous group classes for home educated students and church groups.

Her extensive research and experience has made Cathy a popular speaker at home education conferences around the world as well as a leader in the home education movement.

Cathy has also taken a broader interest in educational issues, authoring the book Government Nannies: The Cradle-to-Grave Agenda of Goals 2000 and Outcome-Based Education to address problems with the current direction of "educational reform." Concerns about government schooling prompted Cathy to get involved with the Children's Scholarship Fund in 1998, piloting a \$15 million scholarship program in Los Angeles. That program helped children from low income families attend private and home schools.

Articles authored by Cathy Duffy, on a wide range of topics, have appeared in a variety of home education magazines and many other publications.