

## The English Bible as Literature

Religious Studies 311

Fall Semester 2019

Manly Hall, Room 210

Monday 3:30-5:50

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### Course Description

This course offers a critical study of the Hebrew Bible (*TANAKH*) and the Christian Bible as distinct but related literary and theological traditions. Stories will be examined in light of their cultural and historical contexts. Emphasis will be placed on narratives and especially the literary qualities of the texts (for example: the uses of symbol, metaphor, repetition; typology and myth; dialogue, narrative technique, and type-scenes), though other approaches to the study of the Bible will be encouraged and explored throughout the semester.

Goals of the course include:

- 1] an appreciation for the significance of *TANAKH* as a literary and theological tradition
- 2] an understanding of how the Christian Bible is constructed
- 3] an understanding of the literary and theological relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament
- 4] greater familiarity with some of the stories that have provided the foundation upon which Western Civilization has been constructed
- 5] the ability to engage Biblical texts as cultural artifacts, works of literature, and key texts in the lives of religious communities
- 6] the ability to demonstrate this engagement in well-written essays, written exercises, and in-class discussion.

### Course Requirements

This course is limited to 15 participants. Religious Studies 311 will be conducted primarily as an advanced undergraduate seminar with occasional lectures by the instructor and individual presentations by the seminar participants. Each participant will contribute actively to the on-going, in-class conversation. Written work will include one 5-page paper (to be critiqued, graded, and returned by the instructor well before mid-semester); one 2-3 page proposal for the final essay; and one 7-10 page term paper—which may be a research paper or a work of literary criticism. Final grades will be comprised of these factors: Class Participation (including occasional in-class response papers [10%] and "resource responsibility" [5%] for one book of the Hebrew Bible): 25%; Prospectus: 10%; Short Paper: 25%; Final Essay: 40%.

WRITING PROFICIENCY IS REQUIRED FOR A PASSING GRADE IN THIS "W-DESIGNATED" COURSE. Papers will be evaluated according to the standards of excellence established in the first-year sequence of composition classes at the University of Alabama. You are encouraged to discuss writing issues with me during my office hours and by appointment.

Additional recommended resources include the University's Writing Center and the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 8th Edition* (2016).

### **Attendance Policy**

This course engages a community of scholars in active, in-class learning. Because the unfolding classroom drama is essentially unrepeatable, and because your classmates are depending upon you for support, criticism and feedback, individual absences from class will diminish the learning experience of all. After two absences, the student's final grade will be reduced by one increment for each additional absence. In other words, if your grade average was **A** at the end of the semester but you had four absences, your final grade for the course would be **B+**. **If attendance is a problem for you for whatever reason, you should not take this course.**

Class discussions are central to how this course shall proceed. Please come to class with written comments and questions that you would like us to pursue together. Good class discussion is a sustained, wide-ranging-yet-focused, fun and exhilarating inquiry. It increases in quality and intensity as the semester progresses. Participation involves attentive listening as well as talking. We have a great deal to learn from each other. Listen respectfully to your colleagues; respond to their questions; build upon their comments.

Academic honesty is expected of all students. All acts of dishonesty (plagiarism, cheating) in any work constitute academic misconduct. Please note: students are prohibited from “resubmitting your own previously submitted work without proper citation and permission from the current instructor to whom the original work is subsequently submitted.” The Academic Misconduct Disciplinary Policy will be followed in the event of academic misconduct.

To request disability accommodations, please contact Disability Services (348-4285). After initial arrangements are made with that office, please see me.

### **Required Text**

- 1] *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).  
NOTE: please purchase this Bible even if you own another one. The annotations and essays contained in this volume will be important for our work together.
- 2] A miscellany of pdfs to be posted on Blackboard.

### **Recommended Texts**

- 1] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981).
- 2] Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982; or New York: Mariner Books, 2002).

**The English Bible as Literature**  
Tentative Course Calendar

**OVERVIEW AND INTRODUCTION**

Week 1

August 26 Preliminaries: The Syllabus  
The Class and its Participants  
Ways of Reading the Bible: Confessional, Canonical, Historical, Literary  
The Question of Canon  
The Scholarly Apparatus of the HarperCollins Study Bible

**Assignment (for next meeting):** Genesis 1-50; HarperCollins Study Bible xiii-lvi.

Sept 2 No Class: Labor Day

**I. GENESIS: Patriarchy, Sibling Rivalry and the Fruits of Cleverness**

Week 2

Sept 9 Stories of Origin: Genesis 1-11  
The Abraham and Sarah Cycle: Genesis 12-24  
The Jacob and Rebekah Cycle: Genesis 25-36

**Assignment (for next meeting):** Genesis 1-50 in review; Exodus 1-3

Week 3

Sept 16 The Jacob and Rebekah Cycle (continued): Genesis 25-36  
The Joseph Cycle: Genesis 37-50  
Discourse: What themes and ironies connect Genesis to Exodus?  
The narrative structure of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles

**Assignment (for next meeting):** skim Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; focus on chapters cited for September 23

**II. The Pentateuch**

Week 4

Sept 23 selections from Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy;  
esp. Exodus 1-4; 12-14; 16; 20-23; 32; 40. Numbers 11-13; 21; Deuteronomy 1; 6;  
31; 34

**Assignment (for next meeting):** skim Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings; focus on chapters cited for September 30

**III. The Deuteronomistic History**

Week 5

Sept 30 selections from Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings  
esp. Joshua 1-6; 23-24; Judges 11; 13-15; 19-21; 1 Samuel 18; 21; 2 Samuel 5; 1 Kings  
1; 5; 9.15-28; 11.26-12; 1 Kings 17-2 Kings 8; 2 Kings 22-23

Discourse: the importance of the Elijah and Elisha cycle

**DUE: First Paper Assignment on "Genesis" or Exodus – 2 Kings (5 pages)**

**Assignment (for next meeting):** selections from Psalms (see October 7 list); read Ruth, Jonah, Malachi, Esther, Daniel 7

#### **IV. The Writings and a Prophet**

Week 6

Oct 7 selections from Psalms, Ruth (c. 586-400?; Pentecost), Jonah (c. 500-300), Malachi (c. 465-424), Esther (c. 350-275?; Purim), Daniel (c. 160)

esp. Psalm 8, 22, 23, 41, 69, 110, 118; Ruth; Jonah; Malachi; Esther; Daniel 7

**Assignment (for next meeting):** Mark

#### **V. Gospel and Acts**

Week 7

Oct 14 Mark Among the Gospels  
Mark 1-9.1

**DUE: Prospectus. Please arrange to meet for a prospectus conversation.**

Week 8

Oct 21 Mark continued  
Mark 9.2-16.8

**Assignment (for next meeting):** skim Luke; focus on chapters cited for November 4; read Acts

Week 9

Oct 28 Guided tour of Library

**Assignment (for next meeting):** skim Luke; focus on chapters cited for November 4; read Acts

Week 10

Nov 4 Acts in Context of Luke-Acts  
Luke 1-3; 9-10; 24; Acts 1; 2-5.11; the rest of Acts

#### **VI. Revelation**

Week 11

Nov 11 Acts (continued); Revelation

Week 12

Nov 18 Revelation and Genesis

Week 13

Nov 25 RESEARCH DAY: Work on Final Essay

#### **REVIEW AND CONCLUSION**

Week 14

December 2 Conclusions and Summary of Paper Presentations

**FINAL PAPER DUE ON OR BEFORE DECEMBER 2, the last day of class.** If you need additional time to complete the final essay, please let me know by November 26.

## **The English Bible as Literature** ***ASSIGNMENT GUIDELINES***

### **A. Written Assignments**

There are four types of writing assignments for this class.

#### 1] Short Essay

One 5-7 page TYPED papers must be submitted. This essay may pursue a theme of your choice. It may center on the Book of Genesis, or it may relate themes that occur in Genesis to any of the subsequent books of the Hebrew Bible. For example, one might take the theme slavery as it appears in Genesis under the direction of Joseph, consider the consequences of the slave state for Moses and his generation, then consider slavery as it appears during the rule of Solomon. A list of possible topics within Genesis is appended to this document, but feel free to devise your own topic.

#### 2] Prospectus

This two-page TYPED assignment should describe: 1) what you plan to do for the final paper; 2) why you chose this particular topic; 3) why this topic matters to you personally; 4) what resources you intend to use in addition to the required texts; and 5) what aspects of the required texts are most helpful to your paper. The prospectus is due on October 14, shortly before or after which time you are welcome to make an appointment with me to discuss your proposal.

#### 3] The Final Paper

The final paper is your response to issues, ideas, problems, solutions, etc., that the course materials and your own research present to you. Topics for the final paper might involve (but are not limited to): theological or literary themes; significant or "insignificant" (matriarchs, prophets, kings, the unnamed) characters in the Bible; uses of the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament; the role of women; relationships among canonical or non-canonical gospels; the eschatological trajectories of biblical narrative, etc. Careful attention should be given to the choice of a topic in conversation with other members of the class and with the instructor.

#### 4] The Reading Response Paper

At various (i.e., "random") moments throughout the semester, you will be asked to comment upon various readings from the Bible with particular reference to their inter-relationships. These brief, in-class compositions will explore such matters as: Who are the characters in a particular story and why are they important? What happened? Where did the events occur? Why does this story matter? What problems does the story pose or resolve? How and where are the concerns of this story developed elsewhere in the canon?

### **B. General Notes on Written Work**

- \* All writing except for the response papers should be TYPED and double spaced.
- \* Recommended fonts include Courier, Palatino, Times, Bookman, and Century Schoolbook.
- \* Type size should be 10, 11, or 12.
- \* Margins on the paper should be 1 to 1 1/2 inches on the sides and 1 inch at the top and bottom.
- \* Papers longer than one page in length should have page numbers.

\* A cover sheet should be stapled with the body of your paper. It should contain the following information:

- 1) title of paper
- 2) your name
- 3) the date
- 4) the course name and number
- 5) the professor

For example, *in the middle of the page*:

Worse Off Ruthless:  
The Significance of the Book of Ruth  
in Relation to Biblical Canon

and *in the lower right corner of the page*:

Terri Mysteria  
December 2, 2019  
REL 311: The English Bible  
Professor Trost

\* Papers with more than six spelling or grammar errors will be returned for revision prior to evaluation. Please use the spellcheck function on the computer and review your work to make certain that properly spelled words are in fact the words you intend to use (for example: be careful about the difference between "there" and "their" or "its" and "it's").

\* Papers with major construction problems will be returned for revision prior to evaluation. At the very least, make certain that your sentences are complete sentences (they have a subject and a verb) and that they express one (but not more than one) complete thought. There should be no run-on sentences.

\* If you have writing composition problems, you should consult one of the specialists at the Writing Center on the third floor of Lloyd Hall (room 322). Your tuition pays for this kind of assistance.

### **C. Resource Responsibility**

During the 4th, 5th, or 6th week of class, you will be responsible for serving as resource person for one of the chapters of the Hebrew Bible. Your task will be to provide a broader perspective on the particular book under investigation. This is not intended to be an onerous or exhaustive assignment; rather, the essence of the assignment is this: 1. describe the overall purpose of this particular text; 2. identify three problems that the text solves and three themes that the text develops; 3. suggest how

this text is in continuity with (or in opposition to) other texts we have read so far. The texts to be explored are these:

Exodus  
Numbers  
Deuteronomy  
Joshua  
Judges  
Samuel  
Kings  
Psalms  
Ruth  
Jonah  
Malachi  
Esther  
Daniel

Please feel free to raise questions about these assignments at any time. You may do this in class—so that others might benefit from your inquiry; or come see me during my office hours. Have fun!

The English Bible as Literature  
Religious Studies 311  
Writing Assignment # 1 SOME EXAMPLES

Options for the first paper.

*Please note: the following suggestions hint at areas that you might explore in your first paper. They have not been refined into topics with a clear focus and an enticing thesis (argument, idea, point). You don't have to say everything you know about your subject. This is a 5-7 page paper (no fewer than 4 pages, double-spaced and TYPED; no more than 7 pages; 11 or 12-point font). Moreover, it is an essay—from the French, essayer, thus—an attempt to explore a particular insight with no pretense of comprehensiveness (save that for a thesis or dissertation).*

- 1] What does the story of disobedience in Eden tell us about the Hebrew Bible understanding of sin? How is this story related to other tales of disobedience in the Primordial Story (Genesis 1-11), especially the Tower of Babel? Why is the Tower of Babel both a fitting end to the first part of Genesis and introduction to the rest of the book?
- 2] Compare and contrast the understanding of God in Genesis 1.1-2.4a with the understanding of God in 2.4b-25. How do these seemingly different understandings of God develop in select stories throughout the rest of the book? Another way to explore this matter would be to discuss the "development" of God's character in Genesis or to argue from particular stories that conflicting views of God are presented throughout Genesis.
- 3] The Primeval Story as a whole implies that God created the world by subduing and shaping the waters of chaos. Later, humankind rebelled against God and contaminated the world. After an attempt to start over, even the "new" world of Noah was sinful. Why did God continue to start over in an effort (seemingly) to fashion a perfect world? What kind of a God is this? And what do these stories say about the nature of human beings?
- 4] Compare and contrast the accounts of God's covenant with Abraham in 13.14, 15.17, and 17.1. How does the covenant with Abraham differ from the covenant with Noah? How do the covenants with God compare with the covenants human beings make with each other throughout Genesis? What is the significance of "covenant" in the book of Genesis?
- 5] What do the stories about the "matriarchs" reveal about the social role of women in the ancestral period? How does the sociology of women in that time compare with your understanding of the role of women today?
- 6] The retelling of the stories about the patriarchs and matriarchs is a way of telling the story about the nation of Israel or the Jewish people. What episodes in the Ancestral Story reveal most clearly the character of the Israelites? How is storytelling used today to establish and/or explore personal and national identity?
- 7] Explore the nuances of stories that appear, on the surface, to be the same. For example, the stories about Sarah and the Pharaoh (12.14), Sarah and Abimelek (20.10), and Rebekah and Abimelek (26.6) or the stories about meetings at the well that lead to marriage (Rebekah, Rachel).



What are the differences from story to story and how do these differences function to advance the Genesis narrative?

8] Paying close attention to what is and is not said in Genesis 22, imagine a meeting around the family table after the Moriah escapade. How does Abraham explain the adventure to Sarah? What is her sense of the matter? What does Isaac have to say to his parents? There are many ways this assignment could be played out. Another option would be this: Having heard (and described in brief outline) Abraham's excuse for his day-long absence, compose Sarah's response to Abraham.

9] In as much detail as possible, describe in narrative form (i.e., retell, do not simply quote) the history of tension between Esau and Jacob. With this history in mind discuss Jacob's strategy to "appease" Esau as it is told in Genesis 32 and 33. How is this story related to (or interrelated with) other portraits of family relations in Genesis?

10] Tell the story of Genesis 34 ("The Rape of Dinah") from the perspectives of Shechem, Dinah, Tamar, Jacob, and the brothers. What loose ends, ambiguities, and tensions linger in the story as recorded in Genesis? If you were writing the sequel to this event, what would happen?

11] Relate the story of Judah and Tamar to the larger theme of male-female relationships as they are represented in Genesis. What are these themes? Are they resolved satisfactorily in Genesis? Carefully choose at least three other examples for your comparison.

12] Discuss the relationship among brothers in the Genesis account. What resolution does the Joseph story bring to the theme of sibling rivalry? What other stories contribute to the development of this theme?

DATES:

Ruth (c. 586-400?; Pentecost), Jonah (c. 500-300), Malachi (c. 465-424), Esther (c. 350-275?; Purim), Daniel (c. 160)