

The Bible and Literature

This course will offer students the opportunity to read widely among the literatures of the Bible, considering in their turn Biblical myth, legendary or patriarchal history, law, chronicle, psalm, love-song and dirge, prophecy, gospel, epistle, and apocalypse. We should not wish, of course, to lose sight of the Bible as scripture, but we will be interested, as well, to study the Bible as narrative, as canon and form, and as a richly tropic and intertextual network, the encyclopedia of all figures in its dense and total configuration. We will be concerned not so much with the archeology or the development of individual Biblical books (although technical matters of general importance will be surveyed), as with a reading of the Bible as a total form, as the radiant text which permeates English and American literature. Our concern with the Bible as canon, as comprehensive form, will entail an effort to read the Biblical text for its figurative interconnectedness, remembering that the Bible of the writers of the New Testament was the Septuagint (the Hebrew Bible in Greek), so that for them the proclamation of the Christian gospel depended upon and was shaped by the Jewish scriptures. The complex symmetry that resulted will be one of our keenest topics of discussion, and our study of important and diverse Biblical genres, including ode, elegy, type-scene, parable, and sayings, will often require our reading forward and reading back between Hebrew scripture and Christian Bible. The Bible's intense and interior confirmation of its own reiterated structures, such as that of passover or ritual cleansing, generates its haunting power to conform its readers to itself. Throughout we will work to avoid the supercessionism with which Christian exegetes have colonized and concentrated the Hebrew scripture. All contemporary addresses to the Bible must acknowledge the ineluctable presence of the Shoah in our acts of reading and interpreting.

In addition to this study of the Bible, we will look throughout the term, as occasion allows or demands, at examples of the relationship between the literatures of the Bible and of English. The central feature of the course is an extremely diverse collection of xerox materials, which draws from numerous traditional and contemporary (alternative) sources, in order to illustrate the continued life of Biblical narrative and poetry. We will try to analyze the terms of the typical interchange between sacred and secular text, in works by Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, Vaughn, Traherne, Milton, Dryden, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Ruskin, Newman, Patmore, Hopkins, Owen, T. S. Eliot, A. R. Ammons, W. S. Merwin, John Hollander, Denise Levertov, Alice Walker, Sharon Olds, Eleanor Wilner, Brece Pancake, and others. We will also note the richness of modern and contemporary Jewish and Israeli poetry, including Yehudi Amichai, Avraham Ben-Yitzhak, Hayim Nachman Bialik, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Rose Drachler, Haim Guri, Linda Zisquit, Amir Gilboa, Rachel Korn, Leonard Cohen, and Robert Mezey. We will consider excerpts, as well, from Shulamith Hareven's Desert Trilogy. We will touch from time to time the issue of Biblical translation, not least to hear the language of the Authorized Version (1611), which has so often sponsored those endless resonances and echoes in the literatures of English, and to collate traditional Christian readings with The Torah (Jewish Publication Society, 1962), and with other contemporary translations from the Hebrew, including Robert Alter's edition of Genesis (1996) and David Rosenberg's The Book of J (1990). Inevitably, the course will address what might be called deforming un/readings of the Bible, those pressured by fierce ideologies, whether political/national, sexual, and/or literal/fundamentalist. We will find ourselves asking: can the Bible survive the claims of its ostensible defenders?

Texts

The Oxford Annotated Bible, with the Apocrypha, ed.
Revised Standard Version (Oxford UP, 1973).

Literary Texts: Many of our readings among the poets will be part of a class-wide project. We will build up an anthology of poems and chapters as the semester progresses. See the list of names given above.

Our accompanying critical readings will contain parts from the following:

Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (Basic Books, 1981): "Biblical Type-Scenes and Uses of Convention," and "Composite Artistry," and "The Life of the Tradition" from his The Art of Biblical Poetry (1985).

Jan Assman, "Mnemohistory and the Construction of Egypt," from Moses the Egyptian (1997).

Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," from his Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (Princeton, 1953).

The Bible and the Narrative Tradition, ed. Frank McConnell (Oxford UP, 1986): Harold Bloom's "From J to K, or the Uncanniness of the Yahwist," and Herbert N. Schneidau's "Biblical Narrative and Modern Consciousness."

A. C. Charity, Events and their Afterlife: The Dialectics of Christian Typology in the Bible and Dante (Cambridge UP, 1966).

C. Stephen Finley, Nature's Covenant: Figures of Landscape of Ruskin (Penn State Press, 1992): "The Typology of Atonement," pp. 227-39.

Northrop Frye, The Great Code: The Bible and Literature (Harcourt Brace, 1982).

Robert Grant and David Tracey, A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible (1984).

Stephen Greenblatt, "The Word of God in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," from his Renaissance Self-Fashioning (U of Chicago, 1980).

Jon D. Levenson, Sinai & Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible (HarperCollins, 1985).

Emmanuel Levinas, "The Bible and the Greeks," "Peace and Proximity," and from interviews.

The Literary Guide to the Bible, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Harvard UP, 1987).

J. Hillis Miller, "Ariadne's Thread," from Interpretations of Narrative (1982).

Ilana Pardes, Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach (Harvard UP, 1992).

Barry Qualls, "The Word made novel," from his The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction (Cambridge UP, 1982).

Elaine Scarry, The Body in Pain (Oxford UP, 1985).

Henri-Jacques Stiker, "The Bible and Disability: The Cult of God," from his A History of Disability, trans. William Sayers (U of Michigan P, 1999).

David Tracy, "Christian Witness and the Shoah," from Holocaust Remembrance, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (1994).

Phyllis Trible, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Fortress P, 1978).

Ben Witherington III, Women and the Genesis of Christianity (Cambridge UP, 1990)

Course Requirements: Regular class attendance, two essays, one brief (2-3 pages) early in the term, and one longer (4-6 pages) toward term's close. Several short writing exercises (in class) at intervals during term, and a final, self-scheduled, comprehensive examination. These requirements may be revised to account for the size of class enrollment. There will also be at least one evening session of the course, "Biblical Pizza," where we view a series of clips and shorts from the filmic history of biblical narrative in the 20th century.