

Fall, 2006/COAS E-103

The Bible and Its Interpreters

Professor Steven Weitzman
MW 4:40-5:30

Although the Bible was composed thousands of years ago, it remains one of the most influential and relevant texts in our culture. It is also one of the most controversial. How has the Bible managed to remain meaningful for so long and for so many? Why has the search for the Bible's meaning generated so much disagreement and even conflict?

"The Bible and its Interpreters" will examine these questions by exploring how Genesis, the first book in the biblical canon, has been read by different interpreters over the centuries—Jews and Christians, ancient exegetes and modern scholars, the powerful and the oppressed, fundamentalists and feminists. Beyond reading Genesis itself, we will also look at novels, poetry, film and other media through which people interpret the Bible and relate it to their lives. Our goal is to develop a deeper understanding not just of the Bible and what it means but of the act of reading as a religious, cultural, and even political act.

Required Texts

- 1) The Harper-Collins Study Bible (or any translation approved by the instructor).
- 2) Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale
- 3) Julian Barnes, The History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters
- 4) James Kugel, The Bible As It Was (Cambridge, 1997)
- 5) Mary Shelley, Frankenstein
- 6) John Steinbeck, East of Eden

Some required readings can be found in a reader placed on Oncourse. Once you are on the site for this course, click on Resources, and you will find the reader listed as "Coll E-103 Reader (Weitzman)". If you need help with Oncourse, please see your a.i.

How to Contact Your Instructors

We encourage you to come see us with any questions or issues that you would care to discuss (and not just in the week before the exams). Beyond what we can do to answer your questions, this is a good way for us to get to know one another and will help to make a rather large class less impersonal. Here is how you reach Professor Weitzman:

Office: 308 Goodbody Hall
Office Hours: W 2:30-4:00 , or by appointment
Phone: 856-6013; email: sweitzma@indiana.edu

The assistant instructors will be giving out their contact information in the first section meeting.

Caution. This class will look at the Bible, and by extension God and religious belief, from many different perspectives. Depending on your background, you may find some of the ideas we discuss offensive, sacrilegious, naïve, disorienting, nauseating, subversive, or just plain wrong. We are not seeking to change or undo your religious beliefs or how you may read the Bible, only to expose you to the beliefs and interpretive practices of others who see things differently, and to help you understand that difference with the help of historical, literary and religious studies scholarship. If you feel you are unable to bracket your own point of view long enough to learn about other, perhaps incompatible perspectives in an attentive and respectful way, *this class is not for you.*

Requirements

Grading is based on a point system. The maximal number of points possible is 1000, and grades will be determined according to the following scale.

1000 points (or above)=A+
940-999=A
901-939=A-
870-900=B+
840-869=B
801-839=B-
770-800=C+
740-769=C
701-739=C-
670-700=D+
640-669=D
601-639=D-
600 or below=F

1) Attendance, preparation and participation in ALL class meetings (200 points). You are expected to be present at all lectures and sections, both physically and mentally; to complete all assigned reading before the class meeting for which it is assigned; and to participate in section discussions in an informed way. Attendance in section will be monitored, and any non-excused absence will cost you points at the discretion of the section leader. Lecture notes and outlines will **not** be distributed on Oncourse—if you want to know what I have to say, you have to come to class and take notes (for advice about the art of taking notes, see me or the ais). We reserve the right to give pop-quizzes if we think the class is having difficulty completing the readings.

2) Interpretive Dossier (500 points). The purpose of this assignment, a series of brief exercises explained in a separate instruction sheet, is to give you a chance to engage the Bible and its interpretation from different perspectives. If you were to complete all the

exercises, and received the maximal number of points, you would earn 700 points. That is 200 more than you need to earn for this particular requirement. What this means is that you do not need to complete all the exercises, *or you can use extra points to opt out of the final* (attendance and the midterm are mandatory no matter how many points you earn). To qualify for points, responses must be turned in at the beginning of wed's lecture of the week specified in the instructions unless otherwise indicated, and late responses will not be accepted (!). Except in extreme situations as determined by the professor, an assignment missed because of illness or for other personal reasons can only be made up by doing other exercises. It is up to you to make sure all work is submitted on time.

Your answers will often be the focus of section discussion but not always.

3) Mid-term and Take Home-Final (100 points for midterm; 200 points for final)

The midterm is mandatory. Failure to show up to take the midterm will not only not earn you points; *it will trigger a penalty of 100 points*. As indicated above, you can opt out of the final, but you must tell us by November 27 if you have decided to do so.

Class Schedule

Week of Aug 28

M Introduction

W Is Genesis the Word of God?

Read: Genesis 1-3; and Deuteronomy 34

For section: On Wednesday, I will be introducing a theory developed by modern scholars to explain who wrote the book of Genesis known as the **Documentary Hypothesis**. Try to apply this theory to the story of Noah's ark in Genesis 6-9. Do you see any inconsistencies or contradictions in that story which might suggest that Genesis 6-9 combines more than one source? Do you have another way to account for these inconsistencies?

Week of September 4

M The Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Text.

Reread Genesis 1-3 and read (and be able to recapitulate) the brief summary of the Enuma Elish, a Babylonian creation story, found at:

http://www.class.uidaho.edu/jcanders/Biblical%20Judaism/plot_summary_of_enum_eli sh.htm

W Knowing Good and Evil

Read (what is preserved of) the Gilgamesh Epic

www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/

For section: Both the Garden of Eden story and the Gilgamesh Epic offer explanations for why human beings do not live forever. After reading the Gilgamesh Epic as found on the Web or as translated in another source, compare its explanation for human mortality with the Garden of Eden story. How do the two explanations resemble each other? How do they differ?

Week of September 11

M, W. Reading the Bible as a Sacred Text
Read: Kugel, 1-42, 53-64

Start Reading Frankenstein for next week.

For section: read the early interpretations of Genesis 1 found in Kugel pp. 53-64. Do any of these readings strike you as a “literal” interpretation of the Bible? What is a literal interpretation of the Bible, and why didn’t early interpreters read it in this way?

Week of September 18

M The Origins of Original Sin
Read: Kugel, 67-82; Oncourse Reader 8-10

W The Fortunate Fall and the Myth of Progress
Read: Oncourse Reader p. 11 (the passage from Kant); First half of Frankenstein

For section: Focusing on one of the two poems that appear on pp. 11-12 in the Oncourse Reader, please answer the following questions. What does the speaker think of the world that humans must live in after the expulsion? What does it mean to live in that world, and how is it different from life in Eden? Does the speaker in this poem understand the expulsion from Eden as a positive or negative thing? Would he or she have chosen to remain in the post-expulsion world or to return to Eden--and why?

Week of September 25

M. Recreating Adam: Frankenstein as a Retelling of Genesis 1-3
Read: Complete Frankenstein by today

W Cain Explained
Read: Genesis 4; Numbers 35:9-28. Start reading East of Eden.

For section: why is God’s statement in Genesis 2:18 “It is not good that the man should be alone” an especially important one for understanding Frankenstein? In what ways does the novel demonstrate the truth of God’s statement?

Week of October 2

M. No class because of the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur. Will be rescheduled as film showing Wednesday 7.p.m., October 11 in Jordan 100A

W Cain and Abel in early Interpretation

Read: Kugel, 85-96; Oncourse Reader 17-21. Print out image on p. 21 and bring to class.

For section: why does God place a mark on Cain in Genesis 4? What does the biblical text tell us about that mark? How do the various interpreters on page 22 of the reader understand its appearance and function?

Week of October 9

M East of Eden

You should have completed East of Eden by this point.

W Even Further East of Eden

Wednesday evening: Film Showing of Pulp Fiction in Jordan 100A, followed by discussion.

For section: the characters of Lee and Leza in East of Eden embody two different modes of interpretation. Describe how each interprets the text and how their interpretation relates to or reflects their personality. Which kind of interpretation does Steinbeck advocate and how is that reflected in his reading of the Cain and Abel story?

Week of October 16

M Q & A

W Midterm

No section this week to recover from midterm

Week of October 23

M Before the Flood

Reread: Genesis 6-9; Gilgamesh Epic Tablets 10-11:

www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/

W Noah in early Interpretation

Kugel, 99-130; Begin reading a History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters

For section: In the Oncourse Reader (pp. 28-39), you will find arguments for and against slavery. How does each side of the debate use Genesis 1-9 to support its position?

Week of October 30

M, W The Quest for Noah's Ark

Read: J. Barnes, The History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters.

For section: two characters in Barnes' A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters set out to discover Noah's ark. Why does each character want to find the ark? What does each character discover in the end? How do you explain their responses to that discovery?

Week of November 6

M, W Fact and Fiction in the Story of Abraham

For section: In a work entitled The Art of Biblical Narrative, Robert Alter argues that "prose fiction" is the best label for describing biblical narrative. Based on what you have learned in class, would you agree that "fiction" is an appropriate label for a work like Genesis? Come to class prepared to debate this issue.

Week of November 13

M Abraham's Trials in Early Interpretation

Kugel, 133-78

W Abraham's Sacrifice in Modern Poetry

Read: Oncourse Reader 23-26. Be sure to read The Handmaid's Tale over break

For section: Implicit in our word "sodomy" is an interpretation of Genesis 18-19, the story of Abraham's nephew Lot. According to this story, God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their "wickedness," often identified as homosexual practice. For this interpretation, see, for example:

<http://www.biblebelievers.com/jmelton/sodom.html>

This is not the only possible interpretation, however. How did early interpreters identify the sin of Sodom (see Kugel 181-195)? Do you think there is anything to these alternative interpretations? Why do you think that the modern understanding of "sodomy" often focuses on sexual immorality and ignores these other interpretive possibilities?

Wednesday November 15. "The Genesis of Genesis", guest lecture by Dr. Shalom Paul of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. 7:30 pm in Myers Hall. Attendance required.

Week of November 20 (No class this week because of the thanksgiving holiday)

Week of November 27

M Eve's Curse

Read: Genesis 2-3; 16; Kugel, 75-78; Oncourse Reader 8-15, 39-46 (Stanton's Woman's Bible)

W The Handmaid's Tale

Read: The Handmaid's Tale

For section: you will debate whether the Bible has been bad or good for women historically.

Week of December 4

M Joseph the Interpreter

Read: Genesis 23-50

W Conclusion

Take Home Final Exam Due Monday December 11 (you're a.i. will instruct you as to when and where to submit them)

