

LIT 494: Senior Capstone Seminar

The Bible and Literature, Fall 2016

Professor John Hunt, LA 127
Weds. 3:30-6:20, LA 205
Office Hours: T 11-12:30, Th 2-3, & by appt.
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Texts:

- *The English Bible: Old Testament*, ed. H. Marks (Norton)
- *The English Bible: New Testament*, ed. G. Hammond & A. Busch (Norton)

Course goals:

The capstone seminar lets senior Literature majors undertake a project of substantial independent research and writing, while studying a topic of general interest in a setting where ideas can be fruitfully exchanged. Our topic this semester is a collection of ancient religious texts which have massively influenced later literary works, and which can themselves be studied as literary works. In the first half of the semester, as we read a large number of important chapters from most of the Bible's books, you should be looking for some issue or problem within these two areas that particularly interests you. Later, as you refine your topic and begin working seriously on it, you will share your reading, thinking, and writing with others in two separate presentations, and receive constructive criticism. A final paper due at the end of the term will challenge you to construct an extended and cohesive argument about your topic.

Schedule of meetings:

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| <i>Aug. 31</i> | Introductions
(Start <i>Genesis</i>) |
| <i>Sept. 7</i> | Myths, legends, and laws
(<i>Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy</i>) |
| <i>Sept. 14</i> | Historical tales
(<i>Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Ezra, and Nehemiah</i>) |
| <i>Sept. 21</i> | Prophecies
(<i>Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Lamentations</i>) |
| <i>Sept. 28</i> | Poetic meditations |

(Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes)

- Oct. 5 Prose fictions
(Ruth, Esther, Jonah, Daniel, Susanna, and Tobit)
- Oct. 12 Gospel narratives
(Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John)
- Oct. 19 Foundations of a new faith
(Acts, Thessalonians, Galatians, Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Romans, and Revelation)
- Oct. 26 First presentations
- Nov. 2 First presentations
- Nov. 9 First presentations
- Nov. 16 Second presentations
- Nov. 23 **No class (Travel day for Thanksgiving)**
- Nov. 30 Second presentations
- Dec. 7 Second presentations

First presentation:

Over the course of about 30 minutes, you'll describe the project you're contemplating and discuss some primary (non-scholarly) readings that you think will figure prominently in your paper: biblical chapters that we've already read, ones we have not read, ancient texts that influenced biblical writings, more recent texts that were influenced by them, etc. I'll ask you to post some excerpts from these texts (and/or directions to read certain passages in our textbooks) on a Moodle forum about five days in advance of the meeting, so that other seminar participants can share some of your reading and give you helpful suggestions for how to use it. (Many people will be giving presentations on the same day, so some care will be required to settle on selections that are substantive but not too long.)

Second presentation:

In this presentation, also about 30 minutes long, I'll ask you to lay out the argument that you think you'll be making in your paper, along with any personal or theoretical investments that you have in it. In advance of this presentation, you should post some of your own writing, in whatever format suits you: a short draft of a paper, a prospectus, several unrelated paragraphs, etc. You may also want

to post some short excerpts from secondary works (criticism, scholarship) that you're planning to refer to in the paper. (Obviously, the length caveats mentioned for the first presentation apply to this one as well. Try to give your fellow seminar participants enough material to gain an insight into what you're doing, but not so much as to overwhelm them.)

Final paper:

The purpose of this paper is to engage in some extended, focused thinking about literature and the Bible. You don't have to write in the hyper-careful mode of a published academic article focused on making original and groundbreaking contributions to scholarship. Feel free, if you prefer, to write a more freewheeling personal essay that simply satisfies your own curiosity. But you should make some kind of argument about a tightly focused topic, and you should locate some published scholarship that engages with the questions you are taking up. Length should be at least 15 pp., not including the bibliography or Works Cited pages. For suggestions about possible types of papers, see "Options for the final paper project" at the end of this syllabus (revised from the version I posted on Moodle earlier). Due by the end of the day on Monday, Dec. 12 (email to me at the address on the syllabus).

Attendance:

Attendance and participation are supremely important in any seminar, and this one meets only once a week. I would like to see everyone here every single day, but I'll spot you one unexcused absence for the semester. More will lower your course grade. If you have a very good reason for missing a class, let me know *in advance or within one day*, and I will note it as an excused absence.

Lateness:

Having everybody in their seats at the beginning of the hour is important to me, but I would rather have you in class than not. So if something urgent comes up, please join us late. If it happens often, however, it may lower your course grade.

Grading:

Most of your course grade for this class will be determined by how you do on the long paper. I will start with that grade and move it up slightly if your class participation and your presentations have been strong, down slightly if those things have been weak or your attendance has been poor. Consequently, this is a class where you really will not have a firm idea of your final grade until you receive it. I will say, though, that I want and expect to assign only A's and B's. If I think that your presentations indicate that you may be headed for a lower grade, I will privately express my concerns to you, in addition to any feedback I give you in class.

Students with Disabilities:

Students with documented disabilities will receive appropriate accommodations. Please speak with me privately about any accommodations you may need, and be prepared to provide a letter from your DSS Coordinator. I will work with you and Disability Services in the accommodation process.

Plagiarism:

All work submitted for this course must be your own and written solely for this course. While all the ideas discussed in our classroom are common property, unacknowledged use of others' written work, whether paraphrased or used verbatim without attribution, constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism is an affront to the fundamental values of an academic institution, indicating a lack of respect for intellectual labor and a lack of responsibility for one's part in sustaining an academic community. You must acknowledge, by citation of name, title, and location, all work that has influenced your thinking, using established academic guidelines for documentation. If you violate this policy I will take action according to university procedures spelled out in the Student Conduct Code.

Academic deadlines:

Please consult the university's Official Dates and Deadlines calendar for all add/drop and fee deadlines. The last time to drop individual classes on CyberBear and receive a refund is 5:00 PM, September 19.

Options for the final paper project

I want all of you to chart your own course in the long paper, growing out of your interests and your past reading experiences, and I want to give you maximum freedom to explore the connections implicit in the title of this seminar. Here are a few general ways that I can imagine an individual project developing, some of them emphasizing the "and" of the title (i.e., exploring connections between the Bible and more properly "literary" works), and others approaching the Bible as literature. If you have an idea for a paper that doesn't seem to fit within any of these broad categories, come talk to me. I'm sure we can make it work.

1. Use of biblical sources in later works.

You might choose to write about some later literary work, or body of work (e.g., *Moby-Dick*, *Asbalom*, *Absalom!*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Paradise Lost*, Blake's poetry), looking at how it alludes to biblical texts or incorporates fragments of their language and actions. The aim here would be to think about ways in which one work of art is formed in dialogue with others. You would not need to limit yourself to literary texts: Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* or Handel's *Messiah*, for example, are philosophical

and musical works that depend deeply on engagement with the literature of the Bible.

2. Survey of influences on later works.

Alternatively, you might start with one biblical book or passage, or one biblical theme or trope e.g., (Ekeziel seeing the wheel in the air, YHWH saying and being “I am what I am,” Moses leading his people to the promised land, swords being beaten into ploughshares, Jesus suffering the little children to come unto him), and look into the impact that it has had on later writing. Under this option, you might decide to survey many later works, devoting less or more time to each as seems appropriate. And again, you would not need to limit yourself to works of fiction or poetry. A Raphael painting, a Michelangelo statue, a Negro spiritual, a Bergman film, might receive some attention in a paper that was primarily about literature.

3. Literary features of biblical books.

There is no requirement for you to write about later literature. Instead of option #1, you could focus on one biblical book, thinking about its literary style (e.g., what constitutes a line of poetry?), its structure (e.g., what fundamental actions does it represent, and how are they integrated?), its imitation or echoing of earlier biblical writings (e.g., do the protagonist’s actions seem to be modeled on some other character’s?), its authorship and dating (e.g., do there seem to have been multiple authors, and how may their different narrative approaches have been affected by their historical circumstances?), its use of materials from other traditions (e.g., do elements of Canaanite or Babylonian creations myths appear in Hebraic accounts of Jehovah’s actions?).

4. Survey of developing biblical traditions.

Instead of examining just one biblical book, you could look for a thread that runs through many, in a variant of option #2. For example, many ideas that became widely accepted in later Christian traditions (the notion of Hell, belief in Satan and other devils, belief in a Messiah, assumptions about personal immortality) don’t figure in *Genesis* or the other books of the Pentateuch, but are present in the teachings of Jesus or Paul. When did they arise, and how did the writing of various biblical books contribute to their evolution? Other concepts and tropes (notions of purity and sin, the idea of a covenant with God, the archetype of journeying toward a promised land) may have been present from the beginning, but they developed over the course of time, changing as new cultural circumstances arose. What kind of story can you tell about them?

5. Canons, apocrypha, and translations.

There has never been just one Bible: it’s a book that’s been assembled by Hebrews and Christians, Catholics and Protestants, Europeans and non-

Europeans, and committed to paper in many different kinds of language. You could write an essay on a work that was excluded from one canon or another (e.g., the history of the Maccabees, the gospel of Thomas, the wisdom of Sirach, the afterlife of Enoch), considering the assumptions about cultural identity and theology implicit in the development of a canon by examining content that was left out. Alternatively, you could look at some of the ways in which a book or passage has evolved through articulation in different kinds of language (vowel-less Hebrew, later Hebrew, *koine* Greek, Church Latin, Catholic English, Protestant English, modern attempts at “relevance”).

6. Doctrine, ideology, and theory.

I’m still wrapping my mind around this one, but yet another option would be to think about ways in which later ideological and theoretical constructs have been built out of, or have drawn inspiration from, particular aspects of the Bible. Northrop Frye’s myth criticism, for example, reflected extensive biblical knowledge, as did Joseph Campbell’s articulations of archetypal human quests. Martin Luther and John Calvin derived their understandings of predestination and grace from countless scriptural passages. Medieval Catholics developed biblical marriage tropes into theological formulations of the relation between Christ and his Church. If you are interested in some intellectual structure whose formulators were steeped in biblical texts, you could perform a critical reading of the doctrine informed by your own biblical knowledge.