

Religious Studies 2VV3/Comparative Literature 2G03

The Bible as Story

McMaster University, Winter 2004

Lectures – Mondays & Thursdays, 4:30 pm

Tutorials – (1) Mondays, 1:30 pm; (2) Fridays, 2:30 pm

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In this course, we will analyze stories from the Hebrew Bible, “Apocrypha,” and New Testament from the perspective of their narrative artistry, approaching biblical literature as literature. On the one hand, we will pursue close readings of primary texts with the aim of opening a window onto the conceptual worlds of biblical authors/redactors and their original readers/hearers. Throughout the long histories of Judaism and Christianity, biblical stories have been told and retold, interpreted and reinterpreted, such that it can prove difficult to extricate them from later traditions about them. A literary approach may help us to encounter these ancient books anew, insofar as it pushes us to be attentive to details such as plot and characterization, alert to what is written no less than what is left unsaid, and attuned to authorial/editorial choices as they shape the experience of the reader.

On the other hand, our focus on biblical narratives will occasion reflection on the formative (and enduring) influence of stories from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, as well as “Apocrypha,” on the Western literary tradition. Even apart from their privileged place in certain religious contexts, these books have played a key role in shaping modern Western assumptions and expectations about stories and writing, while providing precedents and paradigms for a number of literary genres, tropes, characters, and conventions. Accordingly, this course will involve close readings of selected biblical stories, but also study of the discourse about biblical narrative among modern literary critics.

Required Readings

The following books are required and are available for purchase at Titles.

- *Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha* – Students are strongly encouraged to purchase a Study Bible for this course. These handy volumes contain non-denominational English translations (i.e., RSV or NRSV) of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, “Apocrypha”/deutero-canonical books, and New Testament, together with scholarly commentary, introductory essays, maps, and so on. The *HarperCollins Study Bible* is also recommended. Multiple copies of both books can be found in the library. If you own a Bible with another translation that you wish to use in the class, please discuss this with the instructor or TA.
- Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New York: Basic Books, 1981.

- Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990.
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Course Requirements

- 5 Tutorial assignments + class attendance and participation = 35% ~ Students will have the choice of completing 5 tutorial assignments out of 9 total. Whereas lectures will focus on the assigned readings from the Hebrew Bible, “Apocrypha”/deutero-canonical books, and New Testament, tutorials will focus on the books by Alter and Kermode (see above). Accordingly, each tutorial assignment will consist of a brief reflection (1–2 pages each; typed) on the topics in the readings assigned for that session; more specific guidelines will be distributed in the first tutorial meetings (i.e., in the week of Jan 12th).
 - Final paper, due March 22nd = 30 % ~ The paper (7–10 pages) will consist of a literary analysis of one biblical story; a list of stories from which to choose will be distributed in the first weeks of class, together with more detailed instructions.
 - Final exam = 35% ~ The final exam will include a list of short identification questions as well as a synthetic essay. The exam will be based primarily on the Lectures and on the assigned readings from the Hebrew Bible, “Apocrypha”/deutero-canonical books, and New Testament.
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Schedule of Assignments

Week 1.

Jan 5 8: Studying biblical stories and “the Bible” as story: Basic background, methodological considerations, and hermeneutical issues; Alter, pp. 1–46

Week 2.

Jan 12: Genesis 1-10 (The Primeval History)

Jan 15: Genesis 11-36, esp. 12-22, 24 (The Abraham Cycle)

Tutorial 1: Alter, pp. 47-62

Week 3.

Jan 19: Genesis 37-50 (The Story of Joseph)

Jan 22: Exodus, esp. 1-15

Tutorial 2: Alter, pp. 63-87; *Assignment 1

Week 4.

Jan 26: Numbers 1-25

Jan 29: Ruth + Judges 1-8

Tutorial 3: Alter, pp. 88-114; *Assignment 2

Week 5.

Feb 2: 1 Samuel, esp. 1-3, 8-17

Feb 5: Job + Jonah

Tutorial 4: Alter, pp. 131-54; **Assignment 3*

Week 6.

Feb 9: Esther

Feb 12: Daniel + additions to Greek version (Susanna; Bel and the Dragon)

Tutorial 5: Alter, pp. 155-90; **Assignment 4*

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Week 7.

Feb 23: Judith; Tobit

Feb 26: 1 Maccabees; 2 Maccabees

Tutorial 6: Kermode, pp. 1-47; **Assignment 5*

Week 8.

Mar 1, 4: Gospel of Mark

Tutorial 7: Kermode, pp. 49-74; **Assignment 6*

Week 9.

Mar 8: Gospel of Matthew

Mar 11: Gospel of Luke

Tutorial 8: Kermode, pp. 75-100; **Assignment 7*

Week 10.

Mar 15, 18: Gospel of John; ***Final Paper due in class on March 18th***

Tutorial 9: Kermode, pp. 101-24; **Assignment 8*

Week 11.

Mar 22: Acts

Mar 25: Revelation

Tutorial 10: Kermode, pp. 125-45; **Assignment 9*

Week 12.

Mar 29: Conclusions and exam review

Statement on Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty consists of misrepresentation by deception or by other fraudulent means and can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: "Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes

academic dishonesty. For information on the various kinds of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy [http://www.mcmaster.ca/senate/academic/ac_integrity.htm], specifically Appendix 3.

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty: (1) Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained. (2) Improper collaboration in group work. (3) Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

Please be aware that Plagiarism includes quoting and paraphrasing other people's writings or ideas – whether from a book, commentary, website, etc. – without proper citation of the author, book, URL, or so on. I cannot stress this enough: whenever in doubt, always add a citation making explicit reference to where specifically you got your information.