

# ENGLISH 352:583 THE BIBLE AND FEMINIST IMAGINATION

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Graduate seminar; 3 hrs/wk, semestered course; last taught spring 97; 15 students.

**Pedagogical Reflections:** I have taught this course 4 or 5 times, every other year or so, changing it slightly each time. Students are extremely receptive, discussion very lively. Usually the students are mostly women, but there are always one or two men. An important aspect of the course is that I teach midrash--poems and fiction by women based on biblical stories. Poetry by Emily Dickinson, H.D., and Lucille Clifton are especially important; I also use work from my own midrashic text, The Nakedness Of The Fathers. Students have the option as part of their final projects, to write midrash as an alternative to writing a 10-page academic paper, and usually about half of them do so.

What happens when women writers re-examine the roots of culture? What is the relation of the female writer to the male text, the male tradition? How do feminists re-read and re-write that founding text of western patriarchy, the Bible?

In this course we read major portions of Genesis, Exodus, the Book of Judges, the Song of Songs and the Book of Ruth from the Hebrew Bible, the Gospel of Luke and portions of Acts and Epistles from the New Testament. We look at the changing configurations of gendered narratives, and also at countertexts which interrupt these narratives. Alongside the biblical texts, we read feminist history, theology and biblical commentary, and poetry and fiction by women using biblical themes and narratives in revisionist ways. For historical/archeological background we read selections from Gerda Lerner's The Creation Of Patriarchy. Applying the theory of triple hermeneutics in Ostriker, Feminist Revision And The Bible, we look at the hermeneutics of suspicion, desire, and indeterminacy as they play out in a wide variety of women's revisionist texts including work by Hurston (fiction), Dickinson, Rossetti, H.D., Sexton, Clifton and others (poetry). Assignments include weekly response papers, book reviews, class presentations on selected theoretical texts, and a 10-page paper.

## REQUIRED TEXTS

The Bible (King James Version Preferred)

Gerda Lerner, The Creation Of Patriarchy

Zora Neale Hurston, Moses, The Man Of The Mountain

Janine Canan, She Rises Like The Sun

H.D., Trilogy

Packet Of Readings

Poetry Packet

## BOOKS ON RESERVE

Mieke Bal, Lethal Love

Mary Callaway, Sing, O Barren One; A Study In Comparative Midrash

Rita Gross, Ed. Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays On Women And Religion

Julia Kristeva, Tales Of Love

Deena Metzger, What Dinah Thought

A. Ostriker, The Nakedness Of The Fathers

Raphael Patai, The Hebrew Goddess

Elaine Pagels, Adam, Eve And The Serpent

J.A. Phillips, Eve; The History Of An Idea

David Rosenberg, Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read The Jewish Bible

Letty Russell, Ed., Feminist Interpretation Of The Bible

Merlin Stone, When God Was A Woman

Mary Ann Tolbert, The Bible And Feminist Hermeneutics

Phyllis Trible, God And The Rhetoric Of Sexuality

Marina Warner, Alone Of All Her Sex

## **TENTATIVE SCHEDULE**

(Students should have read all of the Book of Genesis before the opening of semester--if you haven't, do it right away. It's actually rather speedy reading if you skip the begats.)

Sep 9: INTRODUCTION

16: THE CREATION STORIES. Canan anthology. LeGuin, "She Un-Names Them;" & poems in packet.

23: PATRIARCHY & THE REPRESSION OF THE GODDESS. LERNER, Chs.7-9; PHILLIPS & STONE in packet.

30: THE FIGURE OF THE MOTHER. LESTER, DELANEY, ADLER, CALLAWAY & TRIBLE in packet.

Oct 7: The Book of Exodus, chs. 1-24, 32-34. The Book of Numbers, chs

11, 20 (Miriam and Aaron material); Deuteronomy, chs 31-34 (okay to skim).

14: HURSTON, MOSES

21: HAREVEN, MIRACLE HATER

28: The Book of Judges, chs 13-16, BAL in packet.

NOV.4: The Song of Songs. FALK, SCHULMAN, KRISTEVA, OSTRIKER in packet.

11: The Book of Job. MITCHELL, SCHWEIZER, WAKEMAN in packet.

18: The Gospel of Luke. RINGE in packet.

25: THE FIGURE OF THE VIRGIN. ROSSETTI, WARNER, KRISTEVA in packet.

DEC 2: H.D., TRILOGY

9: CHRISTIANITY AND ACTS OF INTERPRETATION. PAGELS, OSIEK, TOLBERT, SAKENFIELD in packet.

16: CONCLUSIONS

## ASSIGNMENTS

Each student will do one in-class presentation (see next page). Each week except for the week you do this presentation, you write a brief (about 1-2pp.) informal comment on some aspect of that week's readings. The idea here is partly to make sure you keep up with the reading--but more to keep you thinking actively, engaging in provocative transactions with the reading, finding what's important in it for you, what's powerful, what's questionable. I'll read and comment on these notes, but won't grade them. There will be a take-home, which should total 25 pages when typed. This will include 3 book reviews, including one of a collection of essays; maybe a short essay on a common topic; and a longer essay on a topic of your choosing--or a piece of imaginative work of your own. Writing: I look for force, cogency and breadth of argument, eloquence, wit, degree of provocativeness these papers should be a result of strong feeling plus careful thinking, and should show it.

Needless (?) to say: everyone should participate in discussion--say what you think, no holds barred, expect to disagree and be disagreed with, we'll see if we come to any consensus.

## IN-CLASS PRESENTATIONS

These presentations will summarize a critical volume (or a portion of a volume), making clear the author's approach & method, the content of the argument, and your judgment of the strengths and weaknesses of this work--how persuasive is it to you, as a feminist and as a person. If there's a book not on this list which you think would be relevant and which you'd like to present to the class, let me know.

## DUE DATES

Sep 23

Stone, When God Was A Woman

Patai, The Hebrew Goddess

Phillips, Eve

30

Teubal, Sarah The Priestess

Gross, Ed. Beyond Androcentrism

Callaway, Sing, O Barren One

Trible, God & The Rhetoric Of Sexuality

Oct 28

Bal, Lethal Love

Metzger, What Dinah Thought

Nov 4

Falk, Song Of Songs

Rosenberg, Congregation, Essays By Ozick, Schulman, Segal, Howard

11

Plaskow, Standing Again At Sinai

18

Russell, Ed., Feminist Interpretation Of The Bible

25

Warner, Alone Of All Her Sex

Kristeva, Tales Of Love

Dec 2

Pagels, Adam, Eve & The Apple

Tolbert, Ed., The Bible And Feminist Hermeneutics

Elaine Scarry, The Body In Pain