

The Bible as Story

McMaster University, Winter 2004

Lectures – Mondays & Thursdays, 4:30 pm [CNH 102]

Tutorials – (1) Mondays, 1:30 pm [UH 312]; (2) Fridays, 2:30 pm [KTH 105]

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[Required Readings](#) | [Course Requirements](#) | [Schedule of Assignments](#) | [Additional Resources](#)

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. Note also on-line versions of the Hebrew Bible, Apocryphal/Deutero-Canonical Books, and New Testament: [Revised Standard Version \(RSV\)](#) and [New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

- 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.

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 25, 2004** = 30 % ~ The paper (7–10 pages) will consist of a literary analysis of one biblical story. For more details, see the [Paper Instructions and List of Sources](#).
- 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.

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](#), 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.

Schedule of Assignments

Jan 5, 8: **Studying biblical stories and “the Bible” as story**; Alter, pp. 1–46

Lecture-related Resources ~

- [Chart comparing Jewish and Christian biblical canons](#) (RTOT)
 - [The Tanakh and its Shape](#) (UPenn)
 - [Biblical Criticism](#) (Introductory material from www.religioustolerance.org)
 - [Methods of Biblical Exegesis](#) (Summary based on John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay. *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987; see esp. sections on Literary Criticism, Redaction Criticism, Form Criticism)
 - [Moisés Silva, “Contemporary Theories of Biblical Interpretation”](#) (Excerpt from *New Interpreter's Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1994, 1.107-124; see esp. sections on Reader, Author, Language, and Meaning)
- Further reading* ~

- [Michael Signer, "How the Bible has been Interpreted in Jewish Tradition"](#) (Excerpt from *New Interpreter's Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1994, 1.65-82.)

- [Justo L. González, "How the Bible Has Been Interpreted in Christian Tradition"](#) (Excerpt from in *New Interpreter's Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1994, 1.83-106)

- [An Introduction to Biblical Genres and Form Criticism](#) (Felix Just)

- [Canon and Genre of the Books of the Christian Bible \(OT and NT\)](#) (UPenn)
 - [The Postmodern Bible](#) (see esp. sections on Reader-Response Criticism, Structuralist and Narratological Criticism, and Poststructuralist Criticism)

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

Lecture-related Resources ~

- [Handout on the Primeval History](#) (partial; PDF format)
- [Summary of "Documentary Hypothesis"](#) (UPenn)
- [The Example of the Flood](#) (UPenn)
 - [Literary history of the Pentateuch](#) (L. Eslinger; abstract of John Barton's entry on "Source Criticism" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*)
 - [Thematic Unity of Genesis 1-11](#) (RTOT)
 - [Name of God - Tetragrammaton](#) (UPenn)

Further reading ~

- [Moses and the Authorship of the Pentateuch](#) (L. Eslinger)

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

Lecture-related Resources ~

- [The Abraham Cycle](#) (RTOT)
- [Toledot of Genesis](#) (RTOT)

Further reading ~

- [The Age of the Patriarchs \(ca. 1950-1500 BCE\)](#) (JSource)

- [David L. Petersen, "A Thrice-Told Tale: Genre, Theme, and Motif." *Biblical Research* 18 \(1973\): 30-43.](#) (Article on "Wife-Sister Motif" in Genesis 12, 20, 28)

Tutorial 1 (Jan 16/Jan 19): Alter, pp. 47-62

Jan 19: **Genesis 37-50** (The Story of Joseph)
Lecture-related Resources ~

