

## SYLLABUS FOR RELI 339-002: BIBLE AS LITERATURE

George Mason University, Spring Semester 2024

Adjunct Professor Neil Tow

Tues/Thurs 9am – 10:15 am

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### Description:

The Bible is a collection of books that have captured the imagination of people all over the world for thousands of years. We are going to read and explore a variety of biblical texts with a focus on storytelling, character development, and all the other qualities that make these stories have a lasting impression. We'll read the thoughts and commentary of a of scholars and writers, and we'll focus significant attention to our own perspectives on this material.

### Course Plan:

	Welcome, Intro. to the world of the Bible, What is the goal of studying Bible as literature?, Bible basics, <i>Starting at the beginning</i> – Creation stories	For 1/18: My 'creation story', <b>Reading:</b> Genesis 1:1 thru 2:3, Gottwald "The Bible as Literature and New Literary Criticism" (pp. 22-24), Everett Fox on "God as Creator"
1/23	Review of Genesis 1:1 to 2:3 (Tone, style) Our 'creation stories (small groups), Compare to other creation stories, Geography/History of Canaan	<b>Reading:</b> Genesis 2, Genesis 3
1/25	Intro. to Robert Alter, Genesis creation Pt. 2 (Garden of Eden) – Compare/Contrast with Gen 1&2	<b>Reading:</b> "Eve and Adam Reread" (Trible, "Reading the Bible" (Oduyoye)
1/30	Creation story: Eve/Chava	<b>Reading:</b> Genesis 6:5 to 9:17, Mary Ellen Chase on biblical idea of time
2/1	<i>Reversal of Creation</i> - The Flood Story, Mesopotamian flood story (compare/contrast), Ark in Genesis/Ark in Exodus (Ex. 2:3-5), Time in the Bible	
2/6	Flood story	<b>Reading:</b> Exodus 1:1 to 6:7

2/8	Exodus: Joseph Campbell and the “Hero”, Resonance with Flood story, Cast of characters, Moses	<b>Reading:</b> “Saviors of the Exodus” (Kensky), Exodus 7:8 to 11:10
2/13	Exodus Pt 2: Plagues and Persuasion, Intro. to liberation theology	<b>Reading:</b> “Exodus and Liberation Theology” (Pebblethwaite), Exodus 12:29 to 15:27
2/15	Exodus Pt 3: Leaving Egypt, Memorializing the Exodus (Passover), Miracle at the Sea, Ten Commandments Exodus and Deuteronomy – Comparison (Inner-Biblical Interpretation)	<b>Reading:</b> Intro to the Judges, Gottwald (236-239), “Samson” in Encyclopedia Judaica, Judges 13, 15:3-20, 16:4-31
2/20	Introduction to the period of the Judges, Samson – <i>Pre-Greek Mythology Hercules/Pre-Marvel/DC superhuman</i> , Reading key scenes from the life of Samson (Judges 13, 15:3-20, 16:4-31)	<b>Reading:</b> “The daughter of Jephthah, an inhuman, sacrifice” (Trible), <i>Alter</i> (p. 62), Judges 10 and 11
2/22	Jephthah & his daughter, Transition to Monarchy – Ambivalence in action (Reading Pre-Monarchy texts, Deuteronomy 17, 1 Samuel 8), How do we make order out of disorder?/Leadership issues and challenges – Small group work on qualities of thoughtful/positive leaders	<b>Reading:</b> Gottwald (319-325), Kensky 139-156
2/27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reading the story of David and Bathsheba 2 Samuel 11 &amp; 12</li> <li>End of David’s life, David/Messiah and connection with Jesus in the Gospels, Matthew 1 and Luke 2</li> <li>Mid-Term Presentations start</li> </ul>	<b>Reading:</b> “King David: a Biography” (McKenzie), 1 Kings 2, Matthew 1, Luke 1, “Why are Jesus’ Genealogies in Matthew and Luke Different?”
2/29 (Leap Day!)	Mid-Term Presentations – <i>Have a good vacation!</i>	
3/5	<b>SPRING BREAK</b>	
3/7	<b>SPRING BREAK</b>	
3/12	Returning to Genesis – Stories of the Ancestors – Moshe Greenberg on why we read holy texts, Abraham/Sarah & Hagar, Genesis 16	<b>Reading:</b> “The Desolation of Rejection” (Trible, Ch. 1)

3/14	Finish up Hagar, Start Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22)	<b>Reading:</b> “Binding of Isaac and a call to argue”, Waggoner, Genesis 22, “Mimesis (Auerbach)
3/19	Finish up Binding of Isaac, The Book of Esther: Living and surviving in exile	<b>Reading:</b> Adele Berlin on Esther
3/21	Finish up Esther, Book of Psalms: Poetry for Life, Focus on Ps. 23 – Greenberg, Prose vs. Poetry prayers	<b>Reading:</b> Kushner on Ps. 23
3/26	Study text of Psalm 23, Listen and react to different musical versions of Ps. 23	<b>Reading:</b> Gottwald, 525-541
3/28	Contrast: Ps. 22, Jesus on the cross, Small groups – Read and analyze themes/imagery Ps. 150, Ps. 56, Ps. 92, Ps. 121 <b>*Think about topic/plan for final assignments*</b>	<b>Reading:</b> Gottwald, 590-594, Daniel 3
4/2	Read and discuss the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego – How does Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. interpret the story in his sermon “But if not...” (23 min.) – Listen and reactions	<b>Reading:</b> Gottwald, 541-546, Book of Lamentations Ch. 1 and Ch. 5
4/4	Lamentations – Reading and analysis, How do we mourn or lament?	
4/9	What is prophecy?, Jonah – a memorable prophetic story	<b>Reading:</b> Heschel on prophecy, Book of Jonah
4/11	Jonah, Analysis	<b>Reading:</b>
4/16	Job and Theodicy	
4/18	Theodicy Pt. 2, Final Presentations – First round	
4/23	<b>No Class</b>	
4/25	<b>LAST DAY OF CLASS</b> , Final presentations – Second round	

### Resources:

For Bible readings, you can find many translations of the Bible in many languages at:

[www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)

We will not have a preferred English translation for the class. I will discuss translations and occasionally teach on the meaning of a Hebrew word or phrase to help clarify translation decisions.

### Teacher Bio:

Neil Tow has been an adjunct member of the GMU Religion Department faculty since 2022. He taught the religious philosophy class “Is There A God?”.

## Assignments and Grading – With Rubrics:

Please ensure all written assignments are your own creative work. *Use of AI content creators is prohibited.* This course is about exercising our thinking on these topics, and I look forward to reading your thoughts.

**Grading** for RELI 339 (002) is based on 3 assignments:

1. 3 short reflections, 15 points
2. Mid-Term paper, 35 points
3. Final assignment, 50 points

Total: 100 points

### **3 Short reflection papers (5 points each, Total of 15 points for the semester)**

Write 3 short (2 to 3 paragraphs) reflections on any reading either primary source (Bible,) or secondary (assigned articles), to share your thoughts, reactions, personal interpretations and perspectives. Make direct quotations from the reading(s) you are reflecting on. *Write at least 1 prior to Mid-Term presentations and the rest at least 3 weeks before the end of the semester.*

Expectations for short reflections:

- Thoughtful reflections on the primary and/or secondary source readings
- Quotation(s) from the text(s) to show familiarity with the materials
- At least 2 to 3 paragraphs
- Spelling and grammar check

### **Mid-Term (35 points)**

For the Mid-Term assignment, due by 2/27, write a literary analysis, no more than 5 pages long, of a Bible text we did not discuss in class. During class time on 2/27 and 2/29 every student will share the text they chose & a summary of the main points of analysis.

The types of analysis for this paper may include, but are not limited to:

- Unity/disunity of the text
- Chronology
- Theme(s)
- Use of metaphor, simile, or other symbolic language
- Character development
- Conflict and resolution (or lack of resolution)

Expectations for mid-term paper:

- Length: No more than 5 pages
- Appropriate citations from primary and secondary sources – either parenthetical page/author references, or numbered footnotes
- Bibliography/Works cited at the end – Bibliography/Works cited can be page 6 if needed

- Thorough and thoughtful analysis showing your thinking process – raising questions you feel need more exploration is ok!
- Clear introduction, body of paper, and conclusion
- Material may come from Hebrew Scriptures, Christian Scriptures (or both)

### **Final Assignment (50 points)**

The final assignment is due prior to 4/18/24. Presentations of the final will take place on 4/18 and 4/25.

The mid-term is a chance to sharpen your literary analysis skills, and the final assignment is a chance for you to take the role of teacher or facilitator and creatively teach/present/facilitate an experience to teach and/or share a text, or texts, either text(s) we've studied or another text of interest to you.

You may work alone on this or with a partner from class.

Options:

- Rewrite a text into a **theater script** – Possibilities: add additional dialogue, change the storyteller/perspective...
- Write a **lesson plan** to teach the text to a chosen audience (e.g. adult learners, middle schoolers...) – Possibilities: teacher background/preparation materials , activities/projects to teach the story and its values/lessons...
- Write a **verse by verse commentary** exploring up interesting words and phrases, issues in the text, scholarly viewpoints...
- **Create at least 3 art pieces** that explore the literary meaning, symbolism, and other literary features of a text

Expectations:

- *For the theater script, lesson plan, and verse by verse commentary* – These must include the entire primary text (and/or quotes being used) as well as no less than 3 secondary sources that explore the text and its meaning either worked into the writing itself or as an addendum at the end. Five to 7 pages.
- For the art option, write a 5 to 7 page literary analysis paper including the primary and at least 3 secondary sources explaining the artistic choices and inspiration.
- Spelling and grammar check
- Bibliography/Works cited
- Overall, a thorough, thoughtful, and complete treatment of the topic.

**Books Cited:**

Chase, Mary Ellen. Life and Language in the Old Testament. New York: Gramercy Publishing Co., 1955.

Gottwald, Norman K. The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.

Kensky, Tikvah-Frymer. Reading the Women of the Bible. New York: Schocken, 2002.

Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy. New York: Orbis Books, 1995.

Trible, Phyllis. Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.