DAVID RICHTER’S SYLLABUS

Eng 153W. Introduction to the Bible (revised from Fall 07).

One of the foundations on which Western culture has been built, the narratives of the Bible are strange mixtures of myth, legend and history, both richly compelling and tremendously difficult to interpret. They record a developing human conception of a monotheistic divinity, “God.” His acts and pronouncements over time, together with the religious institutions and practices associated with his worship, embody or express the ethical and cultural values and anxieties of the ancient Hebrews and, later, the early Christian sect, in the face of the prevailing polytheistic religions and cultures of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean world. These narratives were composed over many hundreds of years, written, rewritten and redacted to reflect the shifting historical situations, and evolving values and ideologies of their storytellers and editors, situations we can reconstruct with the aid of the narratives themselves. Meanwhile, as the heirs, like it or not, of Western culture, many of our own values and cultural assumptions are formed by the biblical narratives and precepts in their original form and as they have been recast by later authors like Milton, Melville, and Morrison. “Introduction to the Bible” looks at the rich body of Biblical writing – both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (in English translation) – from a variety of interpretive perspectives. We read narrative, legal writing, prophecy, and doctrine *as* writing, thinking about how the Biblical texts might have come into being and been transmitted (textual approaches); what kinds of cultural and sociopolitical roles they might have played in their original contexts (anthropological, historical, and political approaches); how they attempt to move or affect their audiences, and how various readers have responded to them (reader response/reception approaches); how they work as stories and texts (narrative approaches and close reading); how they have been taken up into the literary and cultural traditions of the West (literary historical approaches). Alongside the Biblical text, we will consider some critical and theoretical texts that might elucidate our reading of the Bible, and we will look at some post-Biblical writing that suggests the wide influence of the Bible on Western literature and culture. Students will, of course, come into the classroom with their own perspectives on the Bible and its significance, and we will discuss many of the ways in which Western religions have depended upon and interpreted the Biblical text; but the class will ask everyone to entertain new (literary and historical) ways of thinking about the text.

Effectively we will be reading the Bible more or less sequentially in September and October, and exploring specific biblical voices, and critical and cultural approaches to biblical texts in November and December. We will not be reading through the entire Bible but will cover substantial portions of the following books: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Amos, Jonah, Ruth, Esther, Job, Ecclesiastes, Daniel, Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Revelation.

Required Texts:

*The Oxford Study Bible. Revised English Bible with Apocrypha*. (Oxford UP). Well, not exactly required. Please buy this or any other Bible you fancy. This one happens to have at least minimal annotations and some interesting essays, though you may find as I do that the editors irritatingly tiptoe around some of the issues that would be controversial in fundamentalist territories.

Norman Gottwald: *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985. A great reference text for doing Bible-as-literature, in explicating the very complicated relationships between the historical moments *described* in books of the Bible and the periods in which those books were actually *written*. Gives a strong sense of the Bible as a social text, as reflecting in narrative art the changes over more than a millenium of the economic, political and religious life of the people who produced it.

Readings on eReserve. The rest of the required readings will be reproduced as PDF files available on Rosenthal eReserve. Hard copies of some of the most important books will be on reserve (I hope) in Rosenthal. Some of these books on reserve are available in paperback, well distributed, and reasonably cheap to own, but I have not ordered them. In addition, I shall be placing various ancillary texts on reserve: the Anchor series of translations with commentary; a Hebrew/English interlinear translation; Bernhard Anderson's textbook on the Bible as literature; an edition of the parallel Near-Eastern texts from the archaic period; plus materials plus works of contemporary criticism we probably won't have time to go over in class.

One final source you may want to acquire is the Online Bible. This consists of a display program with a series of modules many of which are FREE for the downloading. It can be somewhat tricky to set up, but once done, you can set your screen so that it simultaneously displays different translations and versions of the Bible (or, if you have the languages, the original Hebrew or Greek, or Jerome's Latin Vulgate). Or you can look at the three synoptic gospels in three parallel columns on your screen, to examine their similarities and differences. Or you can look at a translation of the Greek Septuagint, which sometimes differs from the accepted Hebrew text. Or it can be used as a concordance program that will allow you to search for different usages of words, or to check if a particular phrase occurs elsewhere. The uses are many. One URLs from which you can download this program is [www.onlinebible.net](http://www.onlinebible.net).

Learning Goals:

Students will learn to read and study Biblical narratives and poetry as literary and cultural texts embodying ethical, religious, and philosophical approaches to life during the millennium during which the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament were composed.

Students will learn to do close reading of Biblical texts and to write about both these ancient texts and about modern and contemporary literature based on the Bible.

Students will read literary and cultural criticism of the Bible, including feminist and historicist approaches that often subject to contemporary critique the social, cultural and ethical vision of the Biblical writers.

Oral and Written Work:

Students are expected to read the primary and secondary texts on time and come to class prepared to discuss them. There are three papers and a final examination. The three short papers are on biblical themes and texts; the assignments themselves are below. The topics will include translation-as-interpretation; reduplications and reinterpretations of biblical narratives; the revision of biblical texts within later scripture and within Western literary texts. There will also be a final examination.

The class fulfills the writing-intensive criteria: the three papers total 10-15 pages, the exam includes essay questions, and attention to writing issues will be paid in class discussion.

Grading. Student grades will be computed as follows:

* Participation: 15%
* First Paper 10%
* Second Paper: 20%
* Final Essay: 30%
* Final Examination: 25%

Tentative Schedule

Week I: August 28: Introduction to the Course.

Elementary questions. 1. What is the Bible? 2. Differences between the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. The issue of the canon. 3. Problems of transmission. 4. Problems of translation. 5. Problems of historical dating and the relationship between the text and the events purportedly narrated. 6. Differences between the Bible and other ancient literatures on account of the cultural uses that have been made of scripture. 7. Biblical texts as composites, collectively written and edited from disparate documents.

Week II: September 4: Genesis.

We need to begin the course proper with an overview of the main narrative sequence (Genesis through Kings, plus the Gospels and the most important apocalyptic narratives) to establish the structural relations of these narratives. The point is to get a sense of the sweep and the structure of the history as a whole and of individual books as making up major elements in that whole.

Biblical Reading: Genesis.

Critical Reading; what makes biblical narrative different from other varieties of narrative:

Erich Auerbach: "Odysseus's Scar" from *Mimesis*. Robert Alter: Introduction to *The Art of Biblical Narrative*

Week III: September 11: The Salvation Narrative: From Egypt to the Promised Land

Biblical Reading: Exodus 1-20, 32-34, Numbers 11-14, 16, 20-25, 31; Deuteronomy 1-4, 28, 31, 34; Joshua 1-12

Critical Reading: See the appropriate chapters in Gottwald for this and the next three sessions.

September 18: No Classes

Week IV: September 25: Political Struggles: Judges and Samuel, Saul and David

Biblical Reading: Judges, 1 Samuel

Critical Reading: Selections from Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (1879). Mattitiahu Tzevat, "Israelite History and the Historical Books of the Old Testament."

Week V: October 2: The Davidic Monarchy: Rise, Decline, Fall

Biblical Reading: 2 Samuel through 2 Kings

October 9: No Class (Monday schedule)

Week VI: October 16: Shorter Postexilic Biblical Narratives

Biblical Texts: Ruth, Jonah, Esther

Week VII: October 23:Wisdom Literature: Questioning Values

Job (1-14, 38-42); Ecclesiastes

Week VIII: October 30: The Synoptic Gospels

Biblical Texts: The Gospels according to Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

Critical Text: “The Synoptic Problem and the Quest for the Historical Yeshua” from Donald H. Akenson: *Surpassing Wonder: The Invention of the Bible and the Talmuds*

Week IX: November 6:Gnostic Voices: John, Thomas, Judas

Biblical Text: The Gospel according to John

Pseudepigraphal Texts: The Gospel according to Thomas; The Gospel according to Judas

Week X: November 13: Prophetic Voices:

Biblical Texts: Isaiah 40-55; Amos; Malachi; Epistle to the Romans; First Epistle to the Corinthians

Week XI: November 20: The Apocalyptic Narratives

Biblical Texts: Daniel, Revelation

Week XII: November 27: How the Bible Makes Its Readers

Critical Reading: From Meir Sternberg:  *Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, chapter 6.

Biblical Text: Genesis, 2 Samuel;

Week XIII: December 4: Gender in the Bible: Narrative as Ideology

Critical Texts: Chapters from the following books: Phyllis Trible: *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Mieke Bal: *Lethal Loves: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories.* Selections from Talmud -- Bava Metzia.

Biblical Texts: selections from 2 Samuel and Judges

Week XIV: December 11: The Bible's Interpretive Communities: The World of Midrash

Critical Readings: James Kugel: "The Assembly of Ladies" from *In Potiphar's House*; Emmanuel Levinas: "And God Created Woman" from *Nine Talmudic Readings*; David Richter, "Midrash and Mashal in the Blessing of Esau" from *Narrative*. Biblical and Midrashic Texts: Genesis; Selections from *Genesis Rabba*

Week of December 18: Final Examination.

Written Work

Paper I: Cultural Values in Judeo-Christian and Other Near Eastern Texts

Using the texts on eReserve from James Bennett Pritchard’s Ancient Near Eastern Texts, discuss the differences in religious concepts and ethical values between parallel biblical and Egyptian or Mesopotamian texts. For example, you might want to compare the creation story in the Enuma Elish with the story of Creation in Genesis 1; the account of the great flood told by Utnapishtim in the Gilgamesh epic (Table XI) and the Noah’s Ark narrative in Genesis 6-8; or the Egyptian “Story of the Two Brothers Anubis and Bata” with the narrative of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife in Genesis 37. Those with a philosophical bent may want to compare the attitudes in the Ludlul Bêl Nimeqi with those of the speaker in Ecclesiastes. Other parallel narratives (and poems) on request. Length 2-3 pages.

Paper II: Exploring Type-Scenes

Your paper will explore the relationship, the similarities and the differences --- in narrative, cultural & ethical content --- between two Biblical texts that are apparently cast in the same mold.  In our class on Judges, for example, we noticed that the episode in Judges 19 (The Concubine of Gibeah) seems to be a version of Genesis 19 (Lot in Sodom).   These so-called “type-scenes” may be apparently historical, or may instead embody folklore materials.   Pick a set of two (or three) and analyze them closely, exploring the assumption that one of them (the later written) is commenting on the other.

 Finding materials:   As Gottwald says, at p. 157, there are a whole lot of stock scenes, such as:

            The birth of an ancestor hero to his previously barren mother

            An encounter with a future betrothed at a well

            An ancestor pretends that his wife is his sister

            Rivalry between a barren, favored wife, and a fertile co-wife

            Testament of a dying ancestor hero

To which we would add:

            The formation of a covenant between an ancestor and the Lord

            The sacrifice by a father of his only child

The reconciliation between rival brothers

The calling by the Lord of a prophet or hero

            The anointing by a prophet of a future king

            The attempt by an underling to possess a wife or concubine that belonged to a dead sovereign

If you decide to work with New Testament materials, the gospels are slightly different because they are covering precisely the same historical material and (particularly the “synoptic” gospels Mark, Matthew, and Luke) are clearly textually interconnected (Matthew was quite evidently writing with a copy of Mark open—the Mark/Luke connection is less direct).  Here the sources are clearly presenting different (and sometimes *radically* different) ideas about the meaning of various events in the life of Jesus.  But along with this there are also type-scenes of the sort we find in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., the miraculous birth connects up with other miraculous births in the Hebrew Bible, the miracles connect up with miracles by Elijah and Elisha in Kings, the storm on the sea of Galilee connects up with the storm in Jonah, the Passion story may be read against the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis or the Passover in Exodus, and so on). Length: 3-4 pages.

Paper III

This paper is designed to explore modern English and American literature as midrash (commentary) on biblical narratives and poems. A further list of possible literary sources will be circulated at least three weeks before the paper is due. But some of the plays, stories and poems you may want to choose to work on would include:

Mark Twain: "Extracts from Adam's Diary" (Genesis)

Anita Diamant: *The Red Tent* (Genesis)

Toni Morrison: *Beloved* (Genesis)

Franz Kafka: “Before the Law” (Exodus)

Zora Neale Hurston: *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (Exodus)

Robert Herrick: “The Dirge of Jephthah’s Daughter” (Judges)

Paddy Chayevsky: *Gideon* (Judges)

John Milton: *Samson Agonistes* (Judges)Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “The Levite of Ephraim” (Judges)

R. V. Cassill: “After Goliath*”* (1 Samuel)

Philip Levine: “The Death of Saul”

Tirso de Molina: *Tamar's Revenge* (2 Samuel)

Peter Schaffer: *Yonadab* (2 Samuel)

Alfred, Lord Tennyson: “Rizpah”

William Cullen Bryant: “Rizpah”

John Dryden: “Absalom and Achitophel*”* (2 Samuel)

George Gordon, Lord Byron: “The Destruction of Sennacherib” (2 Kings)

Algernon Charles Swinburne: “Aholibah” (Ezekiel)

Herman Melville: Father Mapple’s Sermon from *Moby Dick* (Jonah)

Randall Jarrell: “Jonah”

Archibald MacLeish: *J.B.* (Job)

Jean Giraudoux: *Judith* (Judith)

John Milton *Hymn on the Morning of Christ’s Nativity* (gospels)

Robert Browning: “Cleon” (Gospels)

D. H. Lawrence: “The Man Who Died*”* (gospels)

Nikos Kazantzakis: *The Last Temptation of Christ* (gospels)

A. J. Langguth: *Jesus Christs* (gospels)

I haven’t listed any biblical films, but I would be open to papers on interesting (or at least not totally trashy) films that interpret Biblical texts, including *Jesus of Montreal* and *The Passion of the Christ*. Another mode of re-told Bible you may want to analyze would involve graphic art--such as the painted Bibles on church walls that were for many illiterate church-goers their only access to Biblical narrative. And of course there are musical adaptations of Bible such as Bach’s settings of the Passions, or Handel‘s oratorios like *Messiah* and *King Saul,* and Broadway musicals such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Joseph and The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.*

The focus of the paper is to view these retellings as interpretations of Biblical narratives and poetry, inquiring into how they assimilate, adapt, and/or critique the meanings and values of the original biblical texts in the context of the society contemporary to the modern writer. You may want to argue your case: whether they breathe new life into the texts or betray them by translation.

Length 5-8 pages.

Plagiarism:

Please read the attached English Department statement on plagiarism carefully. Plagiarism or cheating is grounds for failure on a given assignment or for the course as a whole. You are expected to do *all* your own work for this class. Although you may consult with other students about assignments, if you do so, you should fully acknowledge any help you receive. That is, note in writing on your assignment who helped you and how they helped.