

**CH 125 From Love Song to Lament: Poetry and the Hebrew Bible**  
**United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities**  
**Instructors: Dr. Carolyn J. Pressler [cpressler@unitedseminary.edu](mailto:cpressler@unitedseminary.edu)**  
**Prof. Pamela S. Wynn, [pwynn@unitedseminary.edu](mailto:pwynn@unitedseminary.edu)**  
**January Term, 2011; afternoons, 1:30-4:45 p.m.**

**GOALS OF THE COURSE:**

This course has twinned foci: (1) Students will be introduced to various kinds of poetry in the Older Testament, including sections from the prophets, the psalms, and the book of Job. (2) Students will also explore contemporary poetry that alludes to OT images, themes, or genres. Students who successfully complete this course will be able to:

1. Understand and articulate the nature of Hebrew Biblical Poetry, including identifying characteristics that distinguish it from prose, summarizing key differences between kinds of poetry found in the Prophets, the Psalter and Job, and attending to the theological (or other) significance of the poetic character of a text. (Class discussions; second essay).
2. Interpret a poetic passage from the OT in ways that:
  - o Recognize the genre and literary context of the passage;
  - o Attend to its literary character (especially the poetic devices reflected in the passage);
  - o Reflect awareness of the cultural context(s) from which the passage emerged; and
  - o Offers a coherent reading of the meaning of the passage appropriate to the student's own interpretive context (second essay);
3. Demonstrate an understanding of allusions to OT themes, images and genres in contemporary poetry (first essay);
4. Engage creatively OT themes, imagery, or genres, especially but not exclusively in their own writing (in-class writing exercises; two pieces of creative writing).

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

1. Brueggemann, Walter, *The Prophetic Imagination*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001. (Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*)
2. Hirsch, Edward, *Poet's Choice*. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, Inc. 2007, c. 2006. (Poet's)
3. MacLeish, Archibald, *J B.: a play in verse*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986. (JB)
4. Miller, Patrick, *Interpreting the Psalms*. Philadelphia:Fortress, 1986. (Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*)
5. Wynn, Pamela S., "Ruth, the Opera," Libretto, 2008. (Wynn)

## **REQUIRED ARTICLES (on reserve)**

1. Davis, Ellen, "Exploding the Limits: Form and Function in Psalm 22," *JSOT* 53 (1992), 93-105. Reprinted in *The Poetical Books*, ed. by David Clines. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997, pp. 135-146. (Davis)
2. Oliver, Mary, "Reading Poems," "Imitation," "Sound," in *A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1994, pp. 10-28. (Oliver)
3. Shaw, Luci, "Reversing Entropy" in *Shouts and Whispers: Twenty-One Writers Speak about Their Writing and Their Faith*, ed. Jennifer L. Holberg. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006, pp. 206-213. (Shaw)
4. Miller, Patrick, "The Theological Significance of Biblical Poetry," in *Language, theology, and the Bible*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, pp. 213-230. (Miller, "Theological Significance")
5. O'Connor, Kathleen, "Wild, Raging Creativity: The Scene in the Whirlwind (Job 38-41)" in *A God So Near*, ed. Brent Strawn and Nancy Bowen. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002, pp. 171-179. (O'Connor, "Job")
6. Pressler, Carolyn, "Certainty, Ambiguity and Trust: Knowledge of God in Psalm 139," in *A God So Near*, ed. Brent Strawn and Nancy Bowen. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002, pp. 91-99. (to be handed out).
6. Pressler, Carolyn. "Ruth" in her *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*. Louisville: Westminster, 2002, pp. 261-308. (Pressler, *Joshua...Ruth*)
7. Ramshaw, Gail, "The Challenge for Liturgical Language," in *Liturgical Language: Keeping It Metaphoric, Making It Inclusive*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996, pp. 5-12. (Ramshaw, *Liturgical*)
8. Ramshaw, Gail, "The Poetic Nature of Liturgical Language" in *Worship: Searching for Language*. Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1988, pp. 109-116. (Ramshaw, *Worship*)
9. Brueggemann, Walter, "On Generosity," "On Reading Psalm 1," "On Reading Psalm 116," "On Reading Psalm 4," and "On Reading Jeremiah 1" in *Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*, ed. Anna Carter Florence. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004, pp. 3-4, 25, 110-111, 164. (Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text*)

## **SUPPLEMENTAL TEXTS:**

1. Alter, Robert, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. New York: Basic Books, 1985. (Alter)
2. Alter, Robert, "The Characteristics of Ancient Hebrew Poetry" in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, Alter, Robert and Frank Kermode.

- Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987, pp. 611-624. (Alter and Kermode)
3. Berlin, A., "Introduction to Hebrew Poetry," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IV. Nashville: Abington, 1996, pp. 301-315.
  4. Petersen, David L. and Kent Harold Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992. (Petersen and Richards)
  5. Hopkins, Denise D., *Journey Through The Psalms*. New York: United Church Press, 1990, pp. 57-85. (Hopkins)
  6. Dobbs-Alsopp, Frederick, "Poetry, Hebrew," in *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, 2009, pp. 550-558. (in reference) (Dobbs-Alsopp)
  7. Heibert, Theodore, "Poetry," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, pp. 1065-1068. (in reference) (Heibert)
  8. Newsom, Carol, "Job" in *New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. IV. pp. 319-41. (Newsom)
  9. Habel, Norman. *Job*. (OTL). Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973, pp. 25-35 and 42-60. (Habel)
  10. Gutierrez, Gustavo, *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987, pp. 67-92. (Gutierrez)
  11. Reid, Stephen Breck, *Experience and Tradition*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991, Chapter V. (Reid)
  12. Westermann, Claus, *The Structure of the Book of Job*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981. (Westermann)
  13. Wharton, James A. "The Unanswerable Answer: An Interpretation of Job," in *Texts and Testaments: Critical Essays on the Bible and Early Church Fathers*. Eugene March, ed. San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1980, pp. 37-70. (Includes an excellent discussion of the Yahweh Speeches.) (Wharton)
  14. Reviews of *JB* in Hone, Ralph E., ed. *The Voice Out of the Whirlwind: The Book of Job*. San Francisco: Chandler, 1960, pp. 282-97;308-310. (Hone)

### **REQUIREMENTS OF THE COURSE:**

- 1. Attendance**—The quality of this course will depend to a large extent on peer learning. It is important that each member come and come prepared. Missing three or more sessions jeopardizes a student's ability to complete the course successfully.
- 2. Assigned readings**
- 3. Prepared interpretation of assigned texts**—There will be Biblical passages and/or contemporary poems assigned for each session. You are expected to exegete the biblical passages, paying special attention to their poetic features, and to analyze the contemporary poetry, paying special attention to their allusions to OT motifs.

- 4. Three short (3-4 page) interpretive papers.** The first paper, a discussion of a contemporary poem, taking into account its biblical allusions, will be due January 10. Students will choose one poem from a selection provided by the instructors to analyze. The second paper, an exposition of one of several biblical poems assigned by the instructors, is due on January 18. The third paper may be either an interpretation of a contemporary poem that alludes to a biblical image, theme, or genre, or an exposition of a biblical poem, and is due January 24. Students may write about one of the poems that the instructors have identified or, may choose a different one, in consultation with the instructors; students will submit the topic they have chosen for the third essay no later than Thursday, January 20.
- 5. Two pieces of creative writing.** The class will regularly engage in creative writing exercises related to the poetry being studied. You are to develop further at least two of the pieces that you have begun in class. One piece of creative writing is due on Thursday, January 13; the other is due no later than the last day of the term, Friday, Jan. 21. This creative writing is required, but will be assigned either an "A" (for a good faith effort completed by the due date) or an "F" (if the assignment is not submitted).

**PLEASE NOTE:**

Papers must be **double-spaced and computer generated**, using an 11 or 12 point font, and **properly footnoted**, following the guidelines in the **Student Handbook**. With one exception, you are to use Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers and Dissertations* as a guide for footnotes. References to biblical verses comprise the one exception. Cite biblical book, chapter, and verses in parenthesis within the body of the paper, like this: (Gen 2:3-6).

**Creative works (poems) must be single-spaced and computer generated**, using an 11 or 12 point font.

Submit **two copies** of all written work. **Include the number of your student mailbox on all papers.**

All work in this class is expected to follow the **Inclusive Language Policy**, as stated in the Student Handbook.

**Please note: late papers will be excused only with the permission of the instructors and only in cases of emergency. Unexcused late papers will be docked one-half letter grade for each day that they are late. Extensions will be granted only in extraordinary circumstances.**

Be aware of the definition of “**plagiarism**” in the Handbook. **Plagiarism will result in an F for the course and may be grounds for dismissal from the Seminary.**

**EXPECTATIONS FOR AUDITORS**

Students auditing this class are expected to complete at least half of the reading, to work with all of the poems assigned for each session and to be ready to contribute to class discussions and participate in class exercises. Auditors do not submit written work, or receive evaluative feedback.

<b>EVALUATION</b>	Prepared Class Participation	35%
	Papers	45%
	Completion of creative writing assignments	20%

**SCHEDULE**

**Monday, January 3**

- A. Introductions and class organization
- B. Interpreting O.T. and Contemporary poetry: Preliminary concerns

**Tuesday, January 4 “How Does a Poem Mean?”<sup>i</sup>**

- A. Approaching a Hebrew Biblical Poem
- B. General Introduction to Contemporary Poetry
- C. Writing exercise

**Assigned Biblical Passages**

Judges 4, especially verses 17-22 and Judges 5, especially verses 24-31

Begin by reading through Judges 4, then reading through Judges 5. Which is prose and which, poetry? What distinguishes the poem from the prose account? Read a lot Judges 4:17-22 and Judges 5:24-31. Do the passages engage you in different ways? How so?

Using the hand out you were given in class, work closely with Jud 5:24-31. How does parallelism work in this section? What repeats, and how does the repetition work? Note when the poem speeds up and when it slows down. What kinds of allusions has the poet drawn? What impact does that have on you? Please remember: there is no single answer to these questions, just as a poem has no one single meaning!

**Assigned Poems**

Please read Oliver before working with these poems. Read the following poems, then choose one poem to work with using the handout “Analyzing Contemporary Poems” as your guide: *Poet’s*:

Edvard Kocbek, pp. 107-109; Avraham Ben Yitzhak, pp. 119-121; "Holy Sonnet," John Donne (handout); "Could Have," Wisława Szymborsak (handout).

### **Required Secondary Reading**

Miller, pp. 29-47;  
Oliver, pp. 10-28  
*Poet's*, pp. xiii-xv

### **Supplemental Secondary Reading**

Alter and Kermode, pp. 611-624  
Berlin, A., pp. 301-315  
Heibert, pp. 1065-1068

### **Wednesday, January 5 Class Does Not Meet**

### **Thursday, January 6 "Prophetic Poems"**

- A. What is prophecy? What makes a poem prophetic?
- B. Prophetic Oracles in the Older Testament: Judgment oracles (Amos)
- C. Contemporary Prophetic Poetry

### **Assigned Biblical Passage** Amos 5:1-24

As you work through Amos 5, take note of the way in which the prophet(s) have used poetic devices such as repetition, unexpected reversals, vivid imagery, and graphic and/or unexpected genres to convey their message. Outline the passage; what is the structure of the poem in its final form?

### **Assigned Poems**

Read the following poems, then choose one poem to work with using the handout "Analyzing Contemporary Poems" as your guide: *Poet's*: Max Jacob, pp. 84-85; Primo Levi, pp. 116-118; Aharon Shabtai, pp. 128-131; Poetry Responds to Suffering, pp. 263-265; Muriel Rukeyser, pp. 269-271; Howard Nemerov, pp. 281-283; Vietnam War Poems, pp. 310-312.

### **Required Secondary Reading**

Brueggemann, pp. 1-57 (esp. 39-57)

### **Supplemental Secondary Reading**

Alter, pp. 137-79  
Shaw, pp. 206-213

## **Friday, January 7 "Judgment and Hope"**

- A. Judgment and Hope in Jeremiah and Second Isaiah
- B. Judgment and Hope in Contemporary Poetry
- C. Writing Exercise

### **Assigned Biblical Passages**

**Exegete** Jeremiah 20:7-13 and 31:13-22

As you work through these passages, take note of the way in which the prophet(s) use poetic devices such as repetition, unexpected reversals, vivid imagery, and graphic and/or unexpected genres to convey their message. Note allusions to Israel's early traditions.

**Read** through Isaiah 40-45

### **Assigned Poems**

Read the following poems, then choose one poem to work with using the handout "Analyzing Contemporary Poems" as your guide: *Poet's*: Ernst Stadler, pp. 74-76; Nelly Sachs, pp. 77-79; *Women and War*, pp. 80-83; Martin Espada, pp. 393-396; "only the beards are different," Bruce Dawe (handout); "Requiem," "Instead of a Preface," and "Lot's Wife," Anna Akhmatova (handout).

### **Required Secondary Reading**

Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, pp. 59-79

### **Supplemental Secondary Reading**

Alter, pp. 137-79

Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, rest of book  
Commentaries on Jeremiah, *loc cit.*

## **Monday, January 10 "Approaching the Psalms"**

**Note: First essay is due at the beginning of class**

- A. Introducing the Psalms
- B. Approaching Biblical Psalms
- C. Writing Exercise

### **Assigned Biblical Passage** Psalm 1

As you work with this text, ask yourself how it is structured, how parallelism functions within the poem, what kinds of images it uses and how it uses them, and what other stylistic devices the psalmist has used in the poem. Then reflect on the significance of the form of the poem for its meaning.

### **Assigned Poems**

Read the following poems, then choose one poem to work with using the handout "Analyzing Contemporary Poems" as your guide: *Poets'*: George Oppen, pp. 255-257; Psalms, pp. 260-262; "'Heaven' has different Signs—to me—" (#575), Emily Dickinson (handout); "God in the Darkness," Elizabeth J. Smith (handout); "Advent" and "Hark the Alleluias," Christina Rossetti (handout).

**Required Secondary Reading**

Review Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, pp. 29-47; read his pp. 81-86  
Miller, "Theological Significance," pp. 213-230

**Tuesday, January 11 "Art and Outcry: Laments"**

- A. Biblical laments
- B. Contemporary laments
- C. Writing exercise

**Assigned Biblical Passages**—Exegete Psalm 22;

Read through Psalms 3, 13, 30, 31, 137 and Jeremiah 20:7-13

**Assigned Poems**

Read the following poems, then choose one poem to work with using the handout "Analyzing Contemporary Poems" as your guide: *Poet's*: Riddles, pp. 36-38; Giuseppe Ungaretti, pp. 62-64; Kadya Molodowsky, pp. 122-124; Miguel Hernández, pp. 146-148; Caesar Vallejo, pp. 149-153; Stanley Junitz, pp. 231-233; John Greeleaf Whittier," pp. 243-245; "The Palestinians Have Given Up Parties," Naomi Shihab Nye (handout); "God Has Pity on the Kindergarten Children," "Diameter of a Bomb," and "When I Bang My Head on a Door," Yehuda Amichai (handout).

**Required Secondary Reading**

Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, pp. 48-63; 100-111  
Davis, pp. 135-146

**Supplemental Secondary Reading**

Hopkins, pp. 57-85

**Wednesday, January 12 No Class**

**Thursday, January 13 "Songs of Praise and Thanksgiving"**

**NOTE: First developed creative writing piece is due at the beginning of class**

- A. Biblical Songs of Praise and Thanksgiving
- B. Contemporary Praise Songs

- C. Writing exercise
- D. Sharing of creative works

**Assigned Biblical Passages**— Exegete 1 Sam 2:1-10;  
Read through Pss. 30; 100; 104; 150; Luke 1:46-55

**Assigned Poems**

Read the following poems, then choose one poem to work with using the handout "Analyzing Contemporary Poems" as your guide: *Poet's*: Gerald Manley Hopkins, pp. 10-12; Caedmon, pp. 13-15; Marina Tsvetaeva, pp. 90-91; Czeslaw Milosz, pp. 98-101; Yehuda Amichai, pp. 125-127; Taha Mahammad Ali, pp. 131-133; Lam Thi My Da, Xuan Quyah, pp. 143-145.

**Required Secondary Reading**

Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, pp. 64-78

**Friday, January 14 "Contextualizing Interpretation"**

- A. Psalms and Worship
- B. Poetic Language and Contemporary Liturgy
- C. Liturgical writing exercise

**Assigned Biblical Passages**—Pss. 100; 137

**Assigned Poems**

Read the following poems, then choose one poem to work with using the handout "Analyzing Contemporary Poems" as your guide: "Let Evening Come" and "Otherwise," Jane Kenyon (handout); "On Generosity," "On Reading Psalm 1," "On Reading Psalm 116," "On Reading Psalm 4," and "On Reading Jeremiah 1," pp. 3-4, 25, 110-111, 164 in Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text*.

**Required Secondary Reading**

Ramshaw, *Liturgical*, pp. 5-12 (on reserve)  
Ramshaw, *Worship*, pp. 109-116 (on reserve)

**Monday, January 17—Martin Luther King, Jr. Day—No class**

**Tuesday, January 18 "Poetic Anguish: Exploring the Book Of Job**

**Note: Second essay is due at the beginning of class"**

- A. Introduction to Job: critical issues and overview
- B. The Yahweh Speeches (Job 38-41)
- C. Writing exercise

### **Assigned Biblical Passages**

Read through Job, especially chapters 1-14, 28-31, 38-42, trying to get a sense of the book as a whole. Pay attention to the different genres in the book; note the shift from prose to poetry. Note also differences in the kinds of poetry you encounter (e.g., Job 3 is quite different from Job 28). Pay attention to who is speaking, and the tone in which they are speaking. Make note of the kinds of poetic devices that the poet(s) of *Job* have used. Then pay special attention to Job 38-42. Work with Job 38, exegeting it as you have other biblical poems.

### **Required Secondary Reading**

O'Connor, "Job"

Pressler, "Job" (lecture notes; to be handed out)

### **Recommended Secondary Reading**

Alter, "Truth and Poetry in the Book of Job," in *Alter* pp. 85-110

Newsom, "Job" in *New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. IV. pp. 319-41

Habel, *Job*. (OTL), pp. 25-35 and 42-60

Gutierrez, *On Job*, pp. 67-92; 301-315

Reid, *Experience and Tradition*, Chapter V

Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job*

Wharton, "The Unanswerable Answer," pp. 37-70

## **Wednesday, January 19 "JB: a play in verse"**

A. JB

B. Writing exercise

### **Required Secondary Reading**

*JB: a play in verse*

### **Recommended Secondary Reading**

Hone, *Reviews of JB*, pp. 282-97; 308-310

## **Thursday January 20 "Poetry Based on the OT: Ruth"**

A. Introduction to the book of Ruth as a novella

B. Reflections on writing the libretto for "Ruth: The Opera"

### **Assigned Biblical Passages**

The book of Ruth

### **Required Secondary Reading**

Pressler, *Joshua...Ruth*, pp. 261-308

**Friday, January 21 "Ruth: The Opera"**

**Note: Second piece of creative writing is due**

- A. Ruth, the Opera
- B. Discussion
- C. Closure: sharing of creative works

**Assigned poetry**—Wynn; as you work with this libretto, take note of and identify the hermeneutical shifts. Ask yourself, how is the story as told in the opera different from the book of Ruth? And, which of these differences and hermeneutical shifts are likely to be due to a particular theological interpretation, and which might be due to the nature of operatic form?

**Required Secondary Reading**

Handout on operatic genre

**Monday, January 24 Third essay is due in instructors' boxes.**

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<sup>i</sup> "How Does a Poem Mean" is a phrase used by Dr. Henry Taylor in a poetry class at American University that I audited in 1980.