

**TR 428 Biblical Women in Art and Literature**

**Tuesdays 8:15 – 11:30**

**Classroom A**

**Instructor:**

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*The Magdalene Reading.*

*Rogier van der Weyden (Flemish), 1445. Oil on panel. National Gallery, London.*

A picture is worth a thousand words, and for every ten words of the Bible that tell a female character's story, there are thousands of images: paintings, sculptures, drawings, films, and more, as well as depictions in poetry and fiction. In terms of depictions of biblical women, the images are not only numerous, but often very different from one another. What might these artistic depictions have to offer us in terms of both the context of their creators as well as insights into the biblical narratives? In what ways can art be a vehicle of insight, meaning and sacrality? This class will serve as an overview not only of female figures in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, but of the ways those figures have been interpreted in visual and literary art, and how we can engage with those interpretations to find new insights into scripture, art, and religious tradition.

**Course objectives—by the end of this course, students will have learned:**

- 1) To look for and retrieve hidden voices and traditions in received canons.
- 2) To attain insights from a variety of interpretations of a text in a variety of media.
- 3) To develop a better understanding of the diversity of figures in sacred narratives.
- 4) To engage creatively with sacred texts and recognize patterns in sacred narratives.
- 5) To develop an experiential appreciation for literary and visual art forms through focused and participatory engagement.

**Course requirements:**

- 1) A 3-5 page reflection paper on a visual artwork whose subject matter is a female biblical figure. **Due March 8.**
- 2) A 3-5 page reflection paper on a literary artwork whose subject matter is a female biblical figure. **Due March 29.**
- 3) A short (5-10 minute) presentation of an image or poem that might serve to illuminate one of the "unsung heroines" for **April 26.** (See handout)
- 4) Two options: An original work of art (including literary art) inspired by study of a female biblical figure, coupled with a 5-10 page reflection paper on the artmaking process. This option is limited to those who are practicing artists. A ten- to twelve-minute sermon incorporating at least one poem or work of visual art, preached on the last day of class, can also be created for this option; turn in sermon text and liturgy for entire worship service. **Due May 17.**

-OR-

- 5) A 15-page research paper investigating the polyvalent understandings of a female biblical figure as interpreted through at least three discrete works of art. (**Due May 17**).

**Course Texts:**

Available at the bookstore, on course reserve at the library, and online bookstores:

- \* Bellis, Alice Ogden. *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994.
- \* Raver, Miki. *Listen to Her Voice: Women of the Hebrew Bible*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998.
- \* Soelle, Dorothee, and Joe H. Kirchberger. *Great Women of the Bible in Art and Literature*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994.
- \* A Bible, including apocryphal books. Tanakh translation preferred for Hebrew Scriptures; NRSV for Christian Scriptures and deuterocanonical books.
- \* Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories*. New York: Schocken Books, 2002.
- \* Newsom, Carol A., and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. *Women's Bible Commentary, Expanded Edition with Apocrypha*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

**Class Sessions:**

February 8: **Introductions, Syllabus, and a Taste of our Work**

Feb. 15: **Eve, the Mother of All Living**

Readings: Genesis 1:26-3:24; Bellis 45-66; Soelle 10-29; Raver 16-25; Newsom & Ringe 15-18.

Feb. 22: **Matriarchs of the Covenant: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah**

Readings: Genesis 12; 16:1-18:15; 20:1-21:21; 24; 25:19-34; 26:1-11; 27; 29:1-30:43; Bellis 67-74, 80-87; Newsom & Ringe, 18-24; Frymer-Kensky 5-23; Raver 26-67; Soelle 30-47.

Mar. 1: **Mothers of the Promise: Hagar and Hannah**

Readings: Genesis 16, 21; I Samuel 1:1-2:11; Newsom & Ringe 95-96; Bellis 74-79, 140-142; Raver 106-111; Frymer-Kensky 225-237, 301-309.

Mar. 8: **Women in tension with other traditions: Rachel, Ruth, the woman of Endor**

Readings: Genesis 31:1-35; Ruth; I Samuel 28:3-25; Frymer-Kensky 238-263, 310-314; Bellis 142-144, 206-211; Newsom & Ringe 84-90; Raver 132-149; Soelle 56-69.

**Visual art reflection paper due.**

Mar. 15: **Nasty Girls: Delilah, Jezebel, Athaliah**

Reading: Judges 16:4-21; I Kings 16:29-33, 18:17-19:3, 21; II Kings 9:30-37, 11:1-16; Bellis 124-127, 164-169; Newsom & Ringe 78-80, 109-111; Soelle 134-147; Raver 100-105, 132-139; Frymer-Kensky 74-88, 209-214.

Mar. 22: **Reading Week: No Class**

Mar. 29: **The Prophet and the Judge: Miriam and Deborah**

Readings: Exodus 1:15-2:10, 14:26-15:22, Numbers 12, Judges 4:1-5:12; Bellis 99-106, 115-119; Frymer-Kensky 45-51, 297-300; Newsom & Ringe 33, 35-36, 52-53, 74-76; Raver 82-99.

**Literary art reflection paper due.**

- Apr. 5: **Queens in the Crossfire: Bathsheba and Esther**  
Readings: II Samuel 11:1-12:24, I Kings 1:1-49, Esther; Newsom & Ringe 98, 131-136; Bellis 149-151, 161-162, 211-217; Frymer-Kensky 143-156; Raver 118-125, 150-163; Soelle 98-115.  
**E-mail choice of "Unsung Heroine" to Bobbi by midnight. In case of conflict, first come = first served; later requesters will be asked to select again.**
- Apr. 12: **Woman as Metaphor: Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs 31**  
Readings: Proverbs 31; Ecclesiastes; Song of Songs; Bellis 193-203; Newsom & Ringe 159-168; Frymer-Kensky 333-338.
- Apr. 19: **Heroine or Seductress? Judith, Susannah, Tamar, Rahab**  
Readings: Genesis 38, Joshua 2, 6; Judith, Susannah; Bellis 91-92, 113-115, 217-222; Newsom & Ringe 24-26, 72, 279-285, 312-314; Frymer-Kensky 34-44; Raver 74-81; Soelle 48-55, 80-97.
- Apr. 26: **Unsung Heroines: Midwives, Concubines, Disciples, Daughters, Mothers, Wives and Queens**  
There are many biblical women that we are unable to cover in depth due to the time limitations of this course. For this week's class meetings, each student is asked to select one of the women from the course handout, "Unsung Heroines," research her story, and find and bring to class an image or poem (original or otherwise) that speaks to the story in some way. The image or poem need not specifically mention the female figure in question; for example, a student may choose the midwives from the story of Moses and bring in an image of a woman in late-stage pregnancy. Google Image searches could be very helpful with this assignment, as could portions of our texts which have not been specifically assigned.  
**E-mail Bobbi by midnight with final project choice and topic.**
- May 3: **The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalene**  
Readings: Matthew 27:55-28:8, Mark 15:40-16:13, Luke 8:1-3, 23:44-24:12, John 19:25-20:18; Newsom & Ringe 348-349, 360-362, 375-376, 378-380, 389-90; Soelle 136-155.
- May 10: **Blessed Among Women: Mary the Mother of Jesus**  
Readings: Matthew 1:18-2:23, 13:34-58, Mark 6:1-6, Luke 1:26-2:52, John 19:25-27; Newsom & Ringe 340-341, 345, 370-373, 388.
- May 17: **Sharing of final projects; conclusions. Final project due.**

**The fine print:**

**Late work** will not be accepted without a very good reason, such as serious illness or death in the family. Please contact Bobbi immediately if there is a possibility that you will have difficulty completing any assignments on time.

**Grades** will be determined on the basis of informed and active class participation (10%), two reflection papers (15% each), a short presentation (20%), and a final paper or project (40%). Attendance is required; students who miss more than two sessions may receive a reduced final grade for the course. Students who miss more than four sessions may fail the course.

**Plagiarism** is the presentation of another's words and/or ideas as one's own, including material taken from the internet. Any student work that the professor suspects may include plagiarized material will be handled as indicated in your student handbook; penalties may include failure of the course and up to two years' academic probation.

**Technology etiquette:**

\*Unless you are on-call for childcare, eldercare, or urgent health matters, cellphones must be turned OFF for the duration of class.

\*Internet resources, such as Bible Gateway and Wikipedia, can be a useful starting point for thinking about a reflection paper, project, or research paper. *They are a starting point only.* In order to demonstrate satisfactory progress in the class, it is essential that the student engage with works of visual and literary art directly, as well as with other resources, particularly for the final paper. Please refer to the supplementary bibliography for suggestions on reading materials for the final paper, or see the instructors if you have questions.