Poetry in the Hebrew Bible

Spring 2016

Thursdays 8:30-noon

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**Course Description**

In this course, we will analyze poems primarily from the books of Job, Lamentations, Psalms, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Class sessions will be divided between studying some aspect of Hebrew prosody (e.g., metaphor, parallelism, lineation) and looking at the ways in which various poets use these particular devices. We will be particularly interested in identifying how poets bring their messages to life, engage their audiences, challenge (or uphold) the status quo, and revitalize the community's imagination and, in turn, its faith in YHWH.

Each week, we will read about a particular aspect of poetry and prepare specific poems with the readings in mind; the readings will provide us with a language that we might discuss specifically how the poets impart and encode their messages.

**Objectives**

In this course, students will:

**1.**Gain an introduction to the nature of poetry in the Hebrew Bible, including its common features and forms

**2.**Explore the diverse genres of poetry in the Hebrew Bible

**3.**Understand the background of common images, metaphors, and motifs

**4.**Consider the range of tools needed to interpret biblical poetry

**5.**Analyze individual poems

**Required Texts**

Altman, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. Revised Edition, New York: Basic Books, 2011.

Kinzie, Mary. *A Poet’s Guide to Poetry*. Revised Edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

**Recommended Texts**

Brown, William. *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002.

Cook, Albert. *The Burden of Prophecy: Poetic Utterance in the Prophets of the Old Testament*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996.

**Optional Texts**

Heaney, Seamus. *The Redress of Poetry*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996.

Hirsch, Edward. *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry*. Harvest/HBJ Book, 2000.

**Course Requirements**

**Class participation**

In preparation for class discussions, students will be expected to prepare notes and questions on secondary readings and to engage in a close reading of the assigned poem(s). Use your journals to apply what you have learned about the techniques and formal elements of poetry to specific lines of poetry from the HB.

Once during the quarter, you will be responsible for reading and generating some discussion about the English poem assigned for the day.

-PLEASE practice reading your poem

-come up with a couple of thoughtful and informed questions for discussion

-some research (on the poet as well as the poem’s themes, images, form, etc.) should inform these questions

-you have 15 minutes (so time yourself)

**Journal assignments**

Mary Kinzie says, “the most effective way to think oneself through a poetic form is to try to write in it” (347). Thus we will engage in weekly journal assignments working toward poems written in the form of or with reference to the themes from Hebrew poetry. What does ‘working toward a poem’ look like? Depending on your interests and gifts, your journals may look very different. Some will fill their journals with poems; others will be more interested (and comfortable!) describing what the poets of the HB are doing. I would like for you all to try writing at least two poems: one based on a form and one working with a theme of Hebrew poetry. But how you get to that point is up to you. I suggest you spend some time on the ‘thresholds of choice’ in the poem (see Kinzie), reflecting on the paths the poet takes and does not take; consider the images that strike you and why they work so well; how the tropes and/or messages work with the traditional form of Hebrew poetry or push against it. Your journal will be the place where you will ‘read poems as if you were writing them’ (Kinzie, 13)

Journals due for review twice over the course of the quarter: Thursday, April 14 and Thursday, May 5.

What I expect to see in these journals: one entry once per week (about 2 pp), engagement with texts and poems, a good faith effort to apply what you learned from the secondary readings to the biblical poems, and most importantly, development and growth over the course of the quarter.

\* I have assigned very little reading so that you will have more time for working with poems in your journals.

**Final paper**

An 8-10 page paper on one poem or poetic unit in the Hebrew Bible (please don’t pick one we talked about in class). Due May 29.

Presentation on May 19 or 26.

Part of your grade involves the presentation of your paper to the class (20 min). I encourage you to use visual aids (Powerpoint, Prezi, handouts, etc.), music, art, etc. to help us understand your reading. At the very least, you must provide a handout with a translation of your poem that graphically highlights your interpretation.

**Grading**

Class Participation: 15%

Journals: 20%

Final Paper: 65%

Over the course of the quarter, PhD Students will write two critical book reviews on monographs on biblical poetry (participation: 15%; journals: 15%; final paper: 50%; book review 1: 10%; book review 2: 10%).

**Structure of Class Sessions**

8:30-9:00. *Reading poetry*

We will begin each class with one or two non-biblical poems.

We will be reading English poetry because it is arguable that we, as a society, are losing the ability to read and appreciate poetry. In order to recapture what we have lost, we will immerse ourselves in poetry. We will let its rhythm ‘work on us’ on a number of different fronts. As we become more attuned to the sounds of poetry in our own language, we will become more sensitive to the way poetry works in general, thereby making us better readers of poetry in the Hebrew Bible.

9:00-10:30 (includes a 15 min break). Discussion of readings and *technique workshop*

We will review and apply the readings to specific examples from the HB. Small groups will work on a short poem or a series of excerpts from longer poems, focusing on analyzing the texts in light of the technique of the day. Groups will present their findings back to the seminar.

10:45-noon. Discussion of one of the assigned poems from the HB.

**Schedule**

*please check canvas each week for updates and changes*

Class 1. Thursday, March 24 *What is poetry? Why read poetry? What can it do?*

Listen to (or read the transcript of) this [interview with Paul Muldoon](http://www.onbeing.org/program/paul-muldoon-a-conversation-with-verse/8276) (on Krista Tippett's On Being)

[Read](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1995/heaney-lecture.html) or [listen](http://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/index.php?id=1506) to Seamus Heaney's acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature (1995)

Read Audre Lorde's [Poetry Is Not a Luxury](http://www.onbeing.org/program/words-shimmer/feature/poetry-not-luxury-audre-lorde/318)

Kinzie, intro and chapter 1, 1-44.

Jonah 2

Class 2. Thursday, March 31 *Hebrew Poetry and Parallelism*

Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty” and “God’s Grandeur”

Lorene Niedecker, “Paean to Place”

(watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVPSKb40xqE&feature=youtu.be)

Adele Berlin, "[Reading Biblical Poetry](http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/book/obso-9780195297515/obso-9780195297515-chapter-63)," in *The Jewish Study Bible*

Alter, 3-26

James Kugel, *The* *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 1-58

Psalms 42-43

Psalm 104

Class 3. Thursday, April 7 *Building blocks and divisions I: the line*

Paul Celan, “Ars Poetica 62”

Eleanor Wilner, “Ars Poetica”

Eleanor Wilner, “Line” (essay)

http://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/crossroads/one\_word/line/

Kinzie, “Line and Half Meaning,” 51-74

Lam 1:1-11

Exodus 15

Context: Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 91-144

Suggested: Mark S. Smith, "The Poetics of Exodus 15 and Its Position in the Book," in Imagery and Imagination in Biblical Literature: Essays in Honor of Aloysius Fitzgerald, F. S. C. (edited by L. Boadt and M. S. Smith; *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Monograph Series 32; Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2001) 23–34.

Class 4. Thursday, April 14 *Building blocks and divisions II: strophes and stanzas*

W. H. Auden, “Funeral Blues”

George Herbert, “Grace”

Kinzie, “Syntax and Whole Meaning,” 75-110

Alter, 27-61

Job 14:1-10

Job 3

Context*:* Jacobsen, T. and K. Nielsen, "Cursing the Day," *SJOT* 6 (1992) 187-204.

Class 5.Thursday, April 21 *Metaphor*

Wordsworth, “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802”

Li Po, “Zazen on Ching-t’ing Mountain”

Kinzie, “Trope and Thought,” 142-186

Alter, “Forms of Faith in Psalms,” 139-170

 Psalms 46, 48

Context: TBA

Class 6. Thursday,April 28 *Prophetic Poetry*

Walt Whitman, “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown”

Alter, “Prophecy and Poetry,” 171-204

Jer 4:19-31; Nahum 3

Context: TBA

Class 7. Thursday,May 5 *Rhetoric and Speech*

Yehuda Amichai, “Jews in the Land of Israel” and “Wildpeace”

Kinzie, “Rhetoric and Speech,” 187-211

Isa 14:4-21; Isa 40:1-20

Context: TBA

Class 8. Thursday,May 12

**NO CLASS**

Class 9. Thursday, May 19

Paper presentations

Class 10. Thursday, May 26

Paper presentations