

Biblical Poetry in Translation (HEB 237) — Fall 2005

[cross-listed with Jewish Studies, Religious Studies, and Literature in Translation]
Department of Hebrew and Semitic Studies, UW–Madison
Prof. Cynthia L. Miller

Class meets: MW 2:30-3:45, 583 Van Hise Hall
Office: 1344 Van Hise Hall — 262-9785 — clmiller2@wisc.edu
Office Hours: MW 3:45-4:45 (and by appointment)

Course Description

This course examines the poetic literature of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) in translation. One-third of the Bible is poetry, but it is poetry that differs radically from the poetry of the Western world, both in its structural features and in the ways it functioned socially in ancient Israel.

We will begin with the distinctive features of biblical poetry and examine how biblical poetry is structured. Rather than employing rhyme or meter as in classical Western poetry, ancient Hebrew poets shaped their poems by means of parallel lines, metaphor, simile, and other semantic features, a fact that greatly enhances our ability to appreciate the poets' artistry even in translation.

The social functions of poetry within Israelite society also differed in many respects from the Western world. Poetry was used for songs of victory and lament, liturgy, prophetic discourse, proverbial sayings, philosophical discussions, and erotic love poetry. Our understanding of both the forms and functions of biblical poetry will be enhanced through an examination of the similar poetry from neighboring ancient Near Eastern society (for example, proverbial poetry and erotic poetry from Egypt, philosophical poetry from Mesopotamia).

Finally, the influence of biblical poetry on later religious literature has been extraordinary. We will briefly examine some of the reflexes of biblical poetry in Jewish literature from the Dead Sea Scrolls, in a poem and aphorisms in the New Testament, and in Jewish and Christian liturgies.

Textbooks

The Jewish Study Bible – Tanakh Translation [NJPS], edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). ISBN 0195297547.

Please note: This version of the Bible will be used for all of our class discussions of the poems in the Bible. It also has introductions to the biblical books which will be assigned, as well as other helpful material (e.g., notes, maps). If you choose not to purchase this version of the Bible *or* you do not wish to bring it to class, it is extremely important that you photocopy the biblical passages under discussion and bring the copies to class with you. It is on reserve at Helen C. White Library: call number = BS895 J4 2004.

Coursepack [abbreviated **C** on the schedule] — available at Bob's Copy Shop, 1314 W. Johnson [corner of Johnson and Charter], phone 251-2936. Ask for the coursepack under the course number HEB 237. (N.B.: The coursepack is *not* for sale at Bob's Copy Shop in University Square.)

Honors Credit [see separate syllabus]

This course is available for honors credit. Honors course work will involve additional readings and a paper analyzing a biblical poem that we did not discuss in class.

Requirements and Grading

1. Attendance — Attendance for the lectures is very important, since there is no single source in the library (or the internet) for the material covered in the lectures. Attendance will not be taken directly, but the ability to complete the course assignments will indirectly reflect your attendance (see #3-4). Students whose behavior in class is disruptive can expect a significant reduction in their final grade. We will start class on time and end on time. Please don't disrupt the class by arriving late or leaving early.
2. Reading — Every reading assignment must be completed on the indicated day.
3. Worksheets (25%) — These are brief assignments connected with some of the readings. The purpose of the worksheets is to guide you in your reading and to apply the previous lectures to your reading. There will be between 15 and 20 worksheets throughout the course of the semester. Ten percent of the worksheets will not be included in the calculation of the final grade. Late worksheets are not accepted, because assignments will be discussed in class on the day they are due. Worksheets cannot be made up, but I will not count against you worksheets missed because of a *documented* emergency (hospitalization, funeral, etc.). Students who participate in university activities (e.g., sports) which require them to miss class must make arrangements with the professor *before* they miss class.
4. Exams (75%) — There will be two exams in the course—a midterm (35%) and a final (40%). The course pack includes study questions for each lecture. Missed exams may be made up only in the case of a documented emergency (hospitalization, funeral, etc.). **You must take the final exam at its scheduled time (7:45 p.m., Friday, December 16).** Students whose religious observance requires that the exam be completed before *Erev Shabbat* must contact me in writing no later than October 1st.

Grading scale:	A	94.0–100	C	70.0–75.9
	AB	88.0–93.9	D	60.0–69.9
	B	82.0–87.9	F	0–59.9
	BC	76.0–81.9		

Office hours

I am available during office hours and by appointment. Please see me as soon as possible if you are having difficulty with the course. Students needing special accommodations for disabilities should provide documentation from the McBurney Center at the beginning of the semester.

Course schedule

N.B. The schedule is subject to change (with due notice).

Introduction to biblical poetry

Poetry in ancient Near Eastern societies. Prose and poetry in the Bible. Distinctive features of biblical poetry (or, What makes a poem a poem?).

9/12 *Read:* C: Berlin, "Parallelism," 155-60
C: Alter, "Characteristics of Ancient Hebrew Poetry," 611-24

9/14 *Read:* Judges 4-5 (especially 4:17-22 and 5:24-31)
Introduction to Judges (NJPS 508-510)
"Historical and Geographical Background to the Bible" (NJPS 2048-2057)

Poetry within narrative

9/19 The Song of Hannah
Read: 1 Samuel 1-2
Introduction to 1 Samuel (NJPS 558-561)

9/21 The Lament of David over Saul and Jonathan
Read: 1 Samuel 27:1-28:2, 29:1-11, 31:1-13 and 2 Samuel 1:1-27 (especially 1:17-27)
Introduction to 2 Samuel (NJPS 619)

The poetry of national mourning — Lamentations

9/26 *Read:* Lamentations (in its entirety)
C: "The ABC's of Grief," 102-114 (translated by Timothy L. Wilt)
Introduction to Lamentations (NJPS 1587-1589)

Liturgical poetry—Psalms

9/28 Psalms in ancient Israelite religion; the formation of the Psalter; the forms of the psalms
Read: C: Gillingham, "The Psalter: Hymn-Book, Prayer-Book, Anthology," 232-51
Introduction to the Psalms (NJPS 1280-1284)

10/3 Psalms of complaint
Read: Psalms 13, 17, 43, 54, 79, 88, 137
C: Barton, "Form Criticism," 838-41
C: Crenshaw, "Classification by Types," 80-86

10/5 no class

10/10 Thanksgiving hymns
Read: Psalms 30, 116, 124, 138

10/12 Songs of praise
Read: Psalms 8, 29, 100, 113
C: Miller, "Enthroned on the Praises of Israel: Interpreting the Biblical Hymns,"
64-78

10/17 **Midterm**

10/19 Royal psalms and Zion hymns

Read: Psalms 2, 45, 46, 48, 72, 99

C: Levenson, "Zion Traditions," 1098-1102

Poetry in religious discourse—The Prophets

Amos

10/24 *Read:* Amos 1-9

C: Hayes, "Form-Critical Study of the Prophets," 143-49, and "The Forms of Prophetic Speech," 273-77

Introduction to Amos (NJPS 1176-1177)

10/26 [Amos—continued]

Isaiah

10/31 *Read:* Isaiah 1 (especially 1:2-9), 40, 49 (especially 49:14-23), 55

Introduction to Isaiah (NJPS 780-784)

Poetry, pragmatics, and philosophy—Wisdom poetry

Qoheleth

11/2 *Read:* Qoheleth (i.e., Ecclesiastes)

Introduction to Ecclesiastes (NJPS 1603-1606)

C: "The Sufferer and the Soul," 206-11

C: "Dialogue of Pessimism," 495-96

Proverbs

11/7 *Read:* Proverbs 1-10, 30-31

Introduction to Proverbs (NJPS 1447-1448)

C: Alter, "The Poetry of Wit," 163-84

11/9 *Read:* **C:** "The Teachings of Ptah-Hotep," 184-88

Job

11/14 *Read:* Job 1-6, 28, 38-42

Introduction to Job (NJPS 1499-1505)

11/16 *Read:* **C:** Habel, "In Defense of God the Sage," 21-38

11/21, 11/23 — No class

Erotic poetry — Song of Songs

11/28 *Read:* Song of Songs (i.e., Song of Solomon)
Introduction to the Song of Songs (NJPS 1563-1566)
C: “Egyptian Love Songs,” 227-31

11/30 *Read:* Genesis 1-3

Biblical poetry re-interpreted in new settings

12/5 Psalms at Qumran (the Dead Sea Scrolls)
Read: **C:** Holladay, “Psalms at the Dead Sea,” 95-112
C: “Apocryphal Psalms,” 208-214
C: “The Thanksgiving Hymns,” psalms 1-7 (= pp. 165-77)

12/7 [Psalms at Qumran—continued]

12/12 Reflections of Hebrew poetry in the New Testament
C: The Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55)
C: Aphorisms in the Gospels (Matthew 5:42; 7:17; 11:30; Mark 3:24-25; 13:24-25; Luke 6:27-28; 6:37-38; 9:24; 11:9-10; 12:48; 15:32)

12/14 The Psalms in post-biblical liturgical settings

12/16 **Final** 7:45 p.m.