

Biblical Poetry in Translation (HEB 237) — Fall 2007

[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, 304 Educational Sciences
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Office Hours: MW 1:00-2:00 (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

Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures (The New JPS Translation According to the Hebrew Text)
(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

Please note: This version of the Bible will be used for all of our class discussions of the poems in the Bible. 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.

Additional readings and resources for the course are available on the Learn@UW web-site for this course (abbreviated **L**: on the course schedule).

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. Students who read Hebrew may read the assigned poems in Hebrew as part of an honors option.

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 (approximately) 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.

The worksheets will be available in the "Content" section of Learn@UW in MicroSoft Word electronic format. Please submit the worksheets to the "dropbox" by 2:00 p.m. on the day they are due. 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. Please note that on November 19 and 21 class will not meet (I will be presenting a paper at a conference), but a large worksheet project will be assigned.

You may substitute attendance at one lecture from the Center for Jewish Studies in place of a worksheet. Write a one page (typed) summary of the lecture followed by one paragraph discussing your personal response to it. The summary is due one week after the lecture.

4. Exams (75%) — There will be two exams in the course—a midterm (35%) and a final (40%). The material on Learn@UW includes study questions. 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 (Monday, 12/17/2007, at 02:45pm). [Please note that the university changed the originally published time for the exam.]**

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 should provide documentation from the McBurney Center at the beginning of the semester.

Course schedule 2007

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?).

- 9/10 *Read:* **L:** Berlin, "Parallelism," 155-60
L: Alter, "Characteristics of Ancient Hebrew Poetry," 611-24
L: Introducing Biblical Poetry [examples for class discussion]
- 9/12 *Read:* Judges 4-5 (especially 4:17-22 and 5:24-31)
L: "Historical and Geographical Background to the Bible" (NJPS 2048-2057)
L: Map of the Ancient Near East

Poetry within narrative

- 9/17 The Song of Hannah
Read: 1 Samuel 1-2
L: Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, "Historical and Geographical Background to the Bible" (pp. 2048-2057) from the NJPS Study Bible (2004).
- 9/19 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)
L: Map: Israel and surrounding countries

Liturgical poetry—Psalms

- 9/24 Psalms in ancient Israelite religion; the formation of the Psalter; the forms of the psalms
Read: **L:** Gillingham, "The Psalter: Hymn-Book, Prayer-Book, Anthology," 232-51
Introduction to the Psalms (NJPS 1280-1284)
- 9/26 Psalms of complaint
Read: Psalms 13, 17, 43, 54, 79, 88, 137
L: Barton, "Form Criticism," 838-41
L: Crenshaw, "Classification by Types," 80-86
- 10/1 Thanksgiving hymns
Read: Psalms 30, 116, 124, 138

10/3 Songs of praise
Read: Psalms 8, 29, 100, 113
L: Miller, “Enthroned on the Praises of Israel: Interpreting the Biblical Hymns,”
64-78

10/8 Royal psalms and Zion hymns
Read: Psalms 2, 45, 46, 48, 72, 99
L: Levenson, “Zion Traditions,” 1098-1102

10/10 **Midterm**

The poetry of national mourning — Lamentations

10/15 *Read:* Lamentations (in its entirety)
L: “The ABC’s of Grief,” 102-114 (translated by Timothy L. Wilt)

Poetry in religious discourse—The Prophets

Amos

10/17 *Read:* Amos 1-9
L: Hayes, “Form-Critical Study of the Prophets,” 143-49, and “The Forms of
Prophetic Speech,” 273-77
L: Amos [introduction] (Oxford Annotated NRSV 1170 OT)
L: Map: Divided Kingdoms of Israel and Judah
L: Map: Judah after the fall of Israel

10/22 [Amos—continued]

Isaiah

10/24 *Read:* Isaiah 1 (especially 1:2-9), 40, 49 (especially 49:14-23), 55
L: Isaiah [introduction] (Oxford Annotated NRSV 866 OT)

10/29 [Isaiah—continued]

Poetry, pragmatics, and philosophy—Wisdom poetry

Proverbs

10/31 *Read:* Proverbs 1-10, 30-31
L: Proverbs [introduction] (Oxford Annotated NRSV 802 OT)
L: Alter, “The Poetry of Wit,” 163-84

11/5 *Read:* **L:** “The Teachings of Ptah-Hotep,” 184-88

Qoheleth

11/7 *Read:* Qoheleth (i.e., Ecclesiastes)
L: Ecclesiastes [introduction] (Oxford Annotated NRSV 841 OT)
L: “The Sufferer and the Soul,” 206-11
L: “Dialogue of Pessimism,” 495-96

Job

11/12 *Read:* Job 1-6, 28, 38-42

L: Job [introduction] (Oxford Annotated NRSV 625 OT)

11/14 *Read:* **L:** Habel, "In Defense of God the Sage," 21-38

11/19, 11/21 — No class

Erotic poetry — **Song of Songs**

11/28 *Read:* Song of Songs (i.e., Song of Solomon)

L: Song of Solomon [introduction] (Oxford Annotated NRSV 853 OT)

L: "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: **L:** Holladay, "Psalms at the Dead Sea," 95-112

L: "Apocryphal Psalms," 208-214

L: "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

L: The Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55 lineated) with attention to the narrative context in Luke 1-2

L: 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 Jewish and Christian liturgical settings

12/17 **Final** 2:45 p.m.