

# ***How to Read the Bible***

*A Benjamin Franklin Seminar  
Religious Studies 1130, Fall 2022  
University of Pennsylvania  
Tuesdays, Thursdays, 1:30-3:14 pm EST*

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To understand the meaning of life, many people turn to the Bible. But what does the Bible mean, and why are there so many different ways of interpreting it?

This seminar aims to help you explore the meaning(s) of the Bible by introducing how it has been read over the ages. We will only be reading a small part of Genesis, chapters 1-22 and a bit of the book of Exodus, but we will use this material to explore much broader questions—about the Bible itself but also about the history of how it has been interpreted by different kinds of people over the ages, both religious and secular. The goal is to help you better understand the Bible by reading it through *other* people's eyes—to understand what it means to them, and along the way, to get a better understanding of how the interpretation of the Bible has shaped history, thought and culture.

As we explore the Bible and its interpretation, we will also pursue two other goals. The first is to help you develop your interpretive skills by giving you opportunities to interpret the Bible or to interpret other people's interpretations of the Bible. The second, shaped by what is happening in the world right now, is to explore the role of biblical interpretation in making sense of two major challenges that the United States has been compelled to face this last year—the threat of a pandemic and racial inequality.

**How to be in touch:** This semester I will not hold regular office hours and instead will be available to meet via Zoom and in-person by appointment. My email is [wsteve@upenn.edu](mailto:wsteve@upenn.edu); and my office is located in 222 Cohen Hall. It would be great to have a chance to meet and learn about you, so please feel encouraged to reach out: if you can't think of anything to ask or talk about, I can come up with things for us to discuss.

## ***Readings***

This is a course not just about the Bible but about the stories that it has inspired over the last two thousand years. The readings include several novels that represent retellings or interpretation of the biblical story. I have ordered the books through Penn book store, but you may also order them on-line on your own. Please try to purchase editions that match the ISBN numbers below.

1. *The Harper Collins Study Bible*  
ISBN 978-0-06-078684-7)

*Recommended as a reliable translation of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament along with the New Testament and what Protestants refer to as the Apocrypha. All translations are interpretations. This translation combines the work of academic scholars from different faith traditions*

*If you already own or prefer another version of the Bible, you can consult with me about whether it is appropriate to use for this class: we will mostly be reading the Book of Genesis and a part of Exodus.*

We will also be reading several works of fiction in the class, each an interpretation of a biblical story.

1. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*  
ISBN-13: 978-1503262423
2. Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*  
ISBN: 978-0-679-73137-5.
3. Albert Camus, *The Plague*.  
ISBN-10: 0679720219

Additional readings are listed in the schedule below and will be made available online, via Penn Libraries, Canvas or I will send as an attachment.

## **Expectations**

This class will look at the Bible, and by extension God and faith, from several different perspectives. Some of us will be coming with strong religious views of their own; others will identify as non-religious or will have never seriously thought about religion before. For us, this difference is not an obstacle: the difference is precisely what we will explore, but it does mean that we all need to try to be open to perspectives different from our own.

Depending on your background, you may find the ideas we discuss mind-opening, but it is also possible that they could feel offensive, sacrilegious, naïve, disorienting, nauseating or idiotic. The purpose of the course is neither to discredit people's religious beliefs nor to validate them, but to expose you to the perspectives of others who see things differently. If you can remain open to learning about other perspectives, not adopting them but learning about them, this class may help you to better understand your fellow humans and yourself.

Each of the written assignments generates points, and grades will be based on the following system. 94 points or above are required for an A; 90-93 points for an A-; 87-89 points for a B+; 83-86 points for a B; 80-82 points for a B-, 77-79 points for a C+, 73-76 points for a C, 70-72 points for a C-, etc.. At least 70 points are needed to pass the class.

- *Class participation* (20 points). This score is based on active, engaged participation in class meetings (informed by the readings). In the schedule below, in connection with each class meeting, there appear questions that you are meant to think about in light of assigned readings, and I intend to post those questions on Canvas as well, aiming for students to share their responses with others. As part of the participation requirement, you are asked to use Canvas to respond in writing to these prompts **at least 4 times** over the semester (200-500 words), not more than two times per month, and to **respond in a substantive way at least 4 times to what your fellow students** write. In responding to others, please note that disagreement is welcome, but you are asked to express dissenting views in a respectful way. Your responses will not be graded, but I will be reading them and responding on occasion.
- *Three Interpretive Exercises* (20 points each--60 points in total)
- *Anthropology of Biblical Interpretation Project* (20 points). Working with two partners, you will observe and analyze how a community today interprets the Bible, using interviews and the online observation of a worship service as a source of data. You will present your findings both as an oral presentation to the class, and as a written report due by the Monday following the last day of class at 5pm. Further instructions given later in the semester.

Although we will be meeting in-person, we are of course still living in the age of Covid-19, and it is theoretically possible, therefore, that we might need to go back on Zoom temporarily if the virus comes back in some new form. If that proves necessary, I will be in touch by email to explain how things will work.

Please stay in touch with me about any personal circumstances that might impact your participation in the class—and you can count on me to be understanding. If you become ill or develop a personal situation that might lead to an absence, please try to contact me ideally **before** missing class if you wish the absence to be excused, or at least let me know as soon as you can after the fact. I will be understanding of special circumstances, but unexcused absences will count against your participation grade. Under certain conditions, a student may be provided an opportunity to make up missed work, but that will depend on the circumstances, and needs to be at my discretion.

Students who have a disability which may necessitate an academic accommodation or the use of auxiliary aids and services in a class are supposed to initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education's Disability Resource Center (DRC). Please contact me and the DRC as soon as possible because timely notice is needed to arrange for appropriate accommodations (phone 723-1066; TDD 725-1067).

### **Thou Shalt Honor Thyself and This Class!**

You are responsible for understanding the University rules regarding academic integrity, and you should review the code if you have not done so:

[http://www.upenn.edu/academicintegrity/ai\\_codeofacademicintegrity.html](http://www.upenn.edu/academicintegrity/ai_codeofacademicintegrity.html) In brief, conduct prohibited by the Code of Academic Integrity includes all forms of academic

dishonesty, among them copying from another's exam, unpermitted collaboration and representing as one's own work the work of another. In other words, "*thou shalt not steal*." If you have questions, please be in touch.

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**Schedule** (subject to revision, but the goal is to stick to it)

Following the reading assignments in the schedule below are questions that you are meant to think about before class and in light of the assigned reading. Although you are being asked to produce written responses to only three of these prompts, you are asked to think about all of them in advance of the class meeting for which they are assigned. This is the best way to get the most out of the class.

**August 30 (Tuesday): Introduction**

**September 1 (Thursday): Origin Stories**

**Reading:** Read *Genesis 1-3*

*Questions:* to help us to understand the creation story in Genesis 1-3 (and as a way to get to know each other) we will begin by reflecting on our own origin stories. For today's class, please compose a brief origin story for yourself--how you would begin the story of your life (in 500 words or less). Please compose your response in a way you are willing to share with everyone in the class, and post your response on a discussion forum to be set up on Canvas by Weds August 31 at midnight EST. We will not have time to discuss all of them in class but will draw on some of them to help us understand the nature of creation stories.

**September 6 (Tuesday): The Genesis of Genesis**

**Reading:** Genesis 4-11; R. Friedman, "Who Wrote the Bible?"

<http://spot.colorado.edu/~tooley/WhoWroteTheBible.pdf>

*Questions* (for you to think about on your own, in light of reading, and then we will discuss together in class today): For most of their history, Jews and Christians have read the book of Moses as a text composed by God or by a divinely inspired prophet, but by the nineteenth century, secular scholars had developed a different view. How does secular biblical scholarship account for the authorship of the Five Books of Moses? Are you convinced by the arguments discussed in Friedman?

**September 8 (Thursday): Comparing Creations**

**Reading:** Review the Garden of Eden story in Genesis 2-3; and read Tablet 1 of the *Gilgamesh Epic*

<http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/tab1.htm>

*Questions:* Do your best to follow the story of Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu in Tablet 1 of *The Gilgamesh Epic*. Do you notice any similarities between the story

there, and the Garden of Eden story in Genesis 2-3? What, if anything, do the parallels tell you about the Garden of Eden story?

Optional: For those interested in further exploring the connections between Genesis and ancient Near Eastern myth, the Babylonian Creation Account known as the *Enuma Elish* has many characteristics in common with Genesis 1. See <https://www.ancient.eu/article/225/enuma-elish---the-babylonian-epic-of-creation---fu/>

### **Sep 13 (Tuesday): Ancient Versus Modern Ways of Reading the Bible**

Reading: James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 1-36 (to be distributed)

*Questions:* Kugel introduces two different ways of reading the Bible: 1) what he refers to as early biblical interpretation, ancient Jewish and Christian interpretation; and 2) modern secular interpretation that began to take shape in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and is practiced in secular universities like Penn. After you have digested the difference, find a friend willing to share their view of the Bible. Does that person share the assumptions of the early interpreters? Modern secular scholars? Do they fall somewhere in between? Where would you position yourself in relation to ancient and modern interpreters?

### **Sept 15 (Thursday): The Parting of the Ways**

Reading: F.F. Peters, *Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, pp. 7-40 (the chapters “The Promise and the Heirs” and “Contested Inheritance”), available through Penn libraries.

*Questions:* Jews, Christians and Muslims all believe in the same God, and all venerate biblical figures like Adam and Abraham. What then seems to be the key difference among these faiths?

### **Sep 20 (Tuesday): Reading Genesis 1-3 like an ancient interpreter**

Reading: James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 44-53; 93-107 (these pages sample various early interpretations of Genesis 1-3), available through Penn libraries.

*Questions:* Early interpretation often arose as an attempt to make sense of small interpretive problems in the biblical text. As you go through the examples revised in the Kugel reading, what interpretive problems in Genesis 1-3 seem to draw the attention of early interpreters and how did they solve them? Your group report should describe at least three examples.

### **September 22 (Thursday): The Origin of Christian Biblical Interpretation**

Reading: The Gospel of John 1:1-18; Gavin Ortlund, “Did Augustine Read Genesis Literally?” See <https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2017/09/did-augustine-read-genesis-1-literally/>.

According to recent polling, about 40% of Christians in the US say the Bible is

the word of God and should be taken literally. See <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/14/5-facts-on-how-americans-view-the-bible-and-other-religious-texts/>. What does it mean to take the Bible “literally?” What are the challenges of reading a biblical text like Genesis literally? Is that the only way that Christians have read the Bible?

No class on Sep 27 because of the Jewish new year

### **Sep 29 (Thursday): Original Sin, or On How Sex Became Dirty**

Reading: Paul’s Letter to Romans 5:12-21; Augustine *Confessions*, books 1, 2 and 6, found online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1101.htm>. And start reading *Frankenstein*.

*Questions:* By doing your own research, can you briefly explain the idea of “Original Sin” and what it has to do with Genesis 1-3? If you have time also address the following: You have been asked to read selections from his autobiographical work *The Confessions*. Do you find the idea of original sin reflected in that work, and where?

### **October 4 (Tuesday): Introducing Jewish Biblical Interpretation**

Reading: Barry Holtz, “Midrash,” to be distributed online.

*Questions:* What is Midrash? According to Holtz, a primary goal of midrash is to fill in the “gaps” in the biblical text. What does he mean by that? How is midrash similar to and different from early Christian interpretation?

### **Oct 6 (Thursday): no class because of Penn’s Fall Break. Use the time to read *Frankenstein***

### **October 11 (Tuesday): A Monstrous Reading of the Adam and Eve Story**

Reading: *Frankenstein* (please try to complete novel by today)

*Questions:* No prompts until the first interpretive exercise is submitted to give you time to focus on your reading and writing.

***Interpretive Exercise #1*** Building on the idea that *Frankenstein* is an interpretation of Genesis 1-3, select one of the following biblical verses from Genesis 1-3 and compose a 5-6 paragraph explaining how the novel interprets it. Do not use secondary sources—the only texts you need cite are Genesis and *Frankenstein*, and you can use parentheses or a footnote to indicate the pages of any passages you cite (Genesis 2:3 or *Frankenstein*, chapter 7, page X). Your essays can be submitted by email to me at [wsteve@upenn.edu](mailto:wsteve@upenn.edu); and I should receive them by Weds October 19 at 9:00pm EST.

Genesis 2:18: And the Lord God said, “It is not good for man to be alone.”

Genesis 3:4: “You won’t die!” the serpent replied to the woman, “God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.” Please email me your papers by Weds Oct 19, 9pm.

**October 13 (Thursday): Undoing Creation: the Flood Story**

Reading: Genesis 4-11.

**October 18 (Tuesday): Noah, his Children, and the History of Racism.**

Reading: David Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: the Origins and History of the Curse of Ham*, pp. 14-27; 146-159, 199-204 (available electronically through Penn libraries)

Optional: For those of you interested in the evolving role of religion and biblical interpretation in the struggle for racial equality in the US, see the online forum “Religion, Secularism and Black Lives Matter”:

<https://tif.ssrc.org/2016/09/22/religion-secularism-and-black-lives-matter/>

**October 20 (Thursday): discussion of Frankenstein papers**

**October 25 (Tuesday): Genesis as History**

Read: Genesis 12-25:10; Kenneth Kitchen, “The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?” Available through Penn libraries, <https://www-baslibrary-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/biblical-archaeology-review/21/2/3>

Z.Herzog, “Deconstructing the Walls of Jericho,”

<http://www.umich.edu/~proflame/neh/arch.htm>

*Questions:* Scholars have sought to use archaeology to prove that the account of Abraham and other Israelite ancestors in Genesis is rooted in historical reality, but not everyone is convinced by such attempts. What is the evidence that Genesis reflects history? Are you convinced by them that there was such a figure as Abraham and that he did the things that Genesis reports?

**October 27 (Thursday): November 8: Genesis as Fiction**

Reading: Reread Genesis 12-22 and the essay “Odysseus’ Scar” by Erich Auerbach:

<http://www.westmont.edu/~fisk/Articles/OdysseusScar.html>.

*Questions:* The Auerbach essay, from a classic of literary interpretation called *Mimesis*, develops a comparison between Genesis 22 and an episode from Homer’s *Odyssey*, arguing that the two texts reflect different ways of representing reality. Describe the difference between the two styles. According to Auerbach, what makes Abraham seem like a “deeper” character than Odysseus?

**November 1 (Tuesday): On How to Survive the Flood**

Reading: Complete *History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, chapters 1, 6 and 9



*Questions:* Who is telling the story of Noah's Ark in chapter 1? What is this character revealing about life on the Ark? What does Barnes seem to be saying about the Bible by retelling it in this way?

*Interpretive Exercise #2:* Many of the chapters in Barnes novel engage the story of Noah's ark in some way—some in obvious ways but others much more subtly. After completing the book, focus on one of these chapters (with the exception of chapters 1, 6 and 9 which we will discuss today), and come to class prepared to explain how it relates to the flood story. *Due Monday November 7 at 9:00pm EST*

### **November 3 (Thursday): Eve #MeToo**

Reading: 1 Timothy, chapter 2 (in New Testament); Stevie Smith, "How Cruel is the Story of Eve" <http://jrong.tripod.com/eve.html>

Susan Donnelly, "Eve Names the Animals,":

<http://eventhealphabet.livejournal.com/85580.html>

Lilly Rivlin, "Lilith," <http://www.lillyrivlin.com/Lilith-Ms.Magazine-Dec.1972.pdf>

*Questions:* read Donnelly's poem together with friends. In light of all the reading, does your group believe the Bible has been good or bad for women?

### **November 8 (Tuesday): On How to Survive the Flood Part II**

Discussion of interpretive exercises #2

### **November 10 (Thursday): Myth and History in the Book of Exodus**

Read Exodus 1-19; Joel Baden, *Exodus: a Biography* pp. 1-29, available through Penn Libraries (via JSTOR).

*Questions:* According to modern scholarship (as represented by Baden) is the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt an historical event or not? What is the evidence that it reflects a memory of a real event? What calls its reliability as a historical record into question?

### **November 15 (Tuesday): The Bible and (Un)Natural Disasters**

Reread Exodus 1-12; Weitzman, "Disasters Natural and Unnatural" (draft, to be circulated).

Questions: How has climate change impacted the interpretation of the Ten Plagues in Exodus?

### **November 17 (Thursday): The Night of Redemption**

Reading: Passover Haggadah. Try this English translation or look at one you find in another way:

[https://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach\\_cdo/aid/661624/jewish/English-Haggadah-Text.htm](https://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach_cdo/aid/661624/jewish/English-Haggadah-Text.htm)



Questions: When celebrating Passover, a festival that goes back to Exodus 12, Jews follow a script called the Haggadah (Hebrew for “Telling”) that uses readings, songs, blessings, and symbolic foods to retell the story of the Exodus. Have a look at the example of a Haggadah noted here, and if you are unfamiliar with it, try to figure out what is going on—it is not a straightforward interpretation of the story by any means. Share some brief observations about what seems strange or surprising about this way of retelling the story.

**Response Paper #3.** For this assignment, you will develop your own interpretation of an episode or chapter that appears in the book of Genesis, writing from the perspective of one of the various sorts of interpreters discussed in class, or from the perspective you propose to me individually. The goal of this assignment is not just to develop your own interpretation of a biblical story, but to do so from another perspective that you have learned about through the course—an ancient interpreter, a modern scholar, an artist, etc. Please feel welcome to be in touch if you want brainstorm about possible approaches (due Tuesday Nov 29 at 9:00 pm EST).

No class for Nov 22 and 24 for the thanksgiving break (but use the extra time in the first half of the week to work on exercise #3 and read Camus’ novel)

### **Nov 29 (Tuesday): The Ten Plagues Then and Now**

*Reading: Camus’ the Plague*

Questions: How does the priest in Camus’ novel interpret the plague in his first sermon? In his second sermon? How does the priest’s interpretation of the plague differ from one sermon to the next?

If you have time and inclination to think about this, how does the priest’s interpretation of the plague differ from Camus’—and how does it differ (or resemble) your own understanding of the pandemic?

### **December 1 (Thursday): Anthropology of Interpretation Presentations**

### **December 6 (Tuesday): Anthropology of Interpretation Presentations**

### **December 8 (Thursday): Conclusions**