

REL 145a -- FINAL PAPER

Suggested Topics

In this paper (approx. 10 pp) you have **two tasks**:

(1) Develop an interpretation of one of the biblical passages in the Suggested Topics listed below (75 % of the paper). Note that you are NOT being asked to work as a source critic identifying the sources that may have been combined in the composition of the passage. You are being asked to study the final form of the passage and provide what you believe is the best or most plausible reading based on a close consideration of the language, style, immediate context, and broader biblical setting (i.e., consult other biblical passages that contain relevant information for, or parallels to your text). You will need to pay attention to the artful use of tone, syntax, wordplay, imagery, genre, form, narrative viewpoint, irony, dialogue, repetition, parallelism – to any techniques and literary devices deployed by the writer to create meaning, to persuade, to provide aesthetic pleasure, and to invite the reflection and participation of the reader. In other words, you are asked to read the passage with the same respect for its literariness as you would the classics of Greek literature or Dante. Remember that the biblical writer's style is terse and riddled with gaps. Pay particular attention, therefore, to points of ambiguity. Identify them clearly, consider various possible interpretations, and point to the evidence for or against these various interpretations. You may decide that one reading is stronger than another; you may decide that two or more readings are equally plausible. When developing your interpretation, focus on the information provided by the passage and its immediate and larger biblical context. **DO NOT BE GUIDED BY EXTERNAL THEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS UNSUPPORTED BY THE TEXT. DO NOT ASSUME BIBLICAL CHARACTERS ARE HEROES WHO NEVER DO ANYTHING WRONG.** Focus on the complex moral and psychological realism of the writing.

N.B. Each suggested paper topic contains references to commentaries or a secondary reading that can help in developing your interpretation, but the assignment is not primarily a research assignment.

(2) Account for two ancient/medieval interpretations of the text, one drawn from traditional Jewish sources and one from traditional Christian sources (25% of the paper). The interpretations are provided with each suggested topic. Your job is NOT to pass judgment on these interpretations as right or wrong but to explain how these interpretations are indeed readings of the passage in question *given the interpreters' assumptions regarding the text* (that it is perfect and contains no contradictions; that it is cryptic; that it is of divine origin; and that it is meaningful). What problems and issues did the ancient interpreter see in the text (i.e., what motivates the interpretation)? To what does the interpretation respond? How does the interpreter resolve ambiguity? What textual details does the interpreter draw on to fill gaps? What does the interpreter choose to ignore?

N.B. You must complete **both parts** of this assignment. **The greatest time and attention should be devoted to developing your own interpretation through close textual analysis (approx. 75% of the paper).**

The paper is due at **3:00** pm on the last day of reading period, at the Department of Religious Studies, 451 College Street.

PLEASE NOTE: Students who cannot meet the due date for the paper must request an extension from the instructor **prior** to the due date. Late papers without an extension will **not** be accepted.

PLEASE NOTE FURTHER: Copies of the source materials needed to write the paper will be available on the class website.

Suggested Topics:

1. The casting out of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen 21:1-16). Focus particularly on vv 9-10.

(a) To assist in developing your own interpretation, see Gen 16, Gen 30 (Rachel and Bilhah, Leah and Zilpah) and consult the bibliographic resources listed below for Genesis commentaries.

(b) Jewish interpretation: *Bereshit Rabbah* LIII:11. Found in *Midrash Rabbah*, Soncino Translation, p. 470. Also *Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin* 89b, "R. Levi said..." to "Our rabbis taught."

Note: This midrash focuses on the verb *metsahek* (mocking, sporting, "fooling around"). This is a pun on Isaac's name (Isaac in Hebrew is *yitshak* which comes from the same root as *metsahek*. See Gen 18:12-16, cf. 21:3-6 -- Sarah's "laughing" is from the same root).

(c) Christian interpretation: Galatians 4, especially v. 21-28. Read chapters 2 and 12 in J. Louis Martyn's *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) pp. 191-208, 25-36.

2. The drunkenness of Noah and the curse of Ham (Gen 9:18-29).

(a) To assist in developing your own interpretation, see Lev 18 (note especially v. 6 and the mention of Canaan in v. 3); Gen 19:30-38; Gen 27, 49; Gen 48:15ff (parental blessings and curses); Gen 10-11 (note, 11:27 -- from which son of Noah is Abraham descended?). Consult the bibliographic resources listed below for Genesis commentaries.

(b) Jewish interpretation: Ramban, *Commentary on Genesis*, comment to v. 18 on p. 139 and comment to v. 26 on p. 143 (last paragraph). [Ramban = Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman = Nahmanides, 1194-1270, lived in Spain.]

(c) Christian interpretation: Luther's Works, vol 2, Lectures on Genesis, chapter 6-14, pp. 165-174.

3. The apostasy with the Golden Calf (Ex 32:1-6)

(a) To assist in developing your own interpretation, read the entire golden calf story (Ex 32:1-33:6. See also Ex 24:12-18; Ex 20:1-6, 19-20; Deut 9 (especially v. 20); 1 Kings 12:25-13:6, 34. See also the commentaries on Exodus by Brevard Childs and Umberto Cassuto.

(b) Jewish interpretation: *Shemot Rabbah* XLI.7. Found in *Midrash Rabbah*, Soncino Translation, pp. 476-79. **NOTE:** You may be selective and discuss only those parts of the midrashic passage relevant to your argument.

(c) Christian interpretation: (Refer to New Testament, Acts 7:35-53.) Tertullian in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol 3.

4. Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses (Num 12:1-16). Focus especially on vv. 1-2.

(a) To assist in developing your own interpretation, see Ex 4:6ff; Lev 14; Num 11:16-30 (extension of prophecy beyond Moses); Ex 15:20 (Miriam is called a prophetess); Ex 4:16, 7:1, 16:9 (Aaron as Moses' prophet or spokesman). Consult the commentary on Numbers by Jacob Milgrom (The JPS Torah Commentary, Judaic Studies Reference Room, SML Room 335b, call number BS 1235.3.S24 1989 (LC) vol 4).

(b) Jewish interpretation: The Sifre to Numbers (anonymous rabbinic commentary, 3rd c.

Note: The midrash assumes that the reader is familiar with a midrashic tradition that after his ascent to Mt. Sinai, Moses abstained from sexual relations with his wife (see Deut 5:27-29). Rashi interprets the biblical statement that the people returned to their tents as indicating a return to sexual relations, from which they had abstained for three days (see Ex 19:10-15). Moses is told to “stand by God,” and this is interpreted to mean that Moses abstained from sexual relations with his wife from that point onward so that he would always be in a state of purity and thus might always be able to speak with God.

The mention of women’s ornaments stems from a word-play on “odot”[which means “because of” or “on account of” in Num 12:1] which is spelled with the same consonants as “adot” [which means “ornaments”].

(c) Christian interpretation: Fragments from the Lost writings of Irenaus (d. ca. 202 C.E.), as found in XXXII, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol 1. OR St. Ambrose, Letter LXIII.

NOTE

1. If you wish to write a paper on a different topic, you must clear that topic with your teaching fellow or with the instructor.

Bibliographic Resources

Critical Introductions to the Bible

1. John Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis). Judaic Studies Reference Room, SML 335B and Div Library Ref: BS 1140.3.C65 2004 (LC)
2. Michael Coogan, *Old Testament : a historical and literary introduction to the Hebrew scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Div Lib Ref, BS 1197.C56X 2006.
3. Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979). CCL: BS 1140.2 C48 1979 (LC).
4. Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction*. (Philadelphia : Fortress Press, c1985.) CCL Stacks: BS1140.2 G59 1985 (LC)

Commentaries

5. *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1964-1993). CCL Stacks BS 192.2 A1 1964 G3 (LC); SML Jud. Studies Ref Room, SML 335B, and Div Lib Ref BS 491.2 A5 2. One volume for each book of the Bible.
6. *The Jewish Publication Society (JPS) Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989). SML Jud. Studies Ref Room, SML 335B, BS 1235.3 S24 1989 (LC). One volume for each of Gen, Ex, Lev, Num and Dt.
7. *The New Interpreter's Bible* : general articles & introduction, commentary, & reflections for each book of the Bible, including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books in twelve volumes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004). Div Lib Ref. BS491.2 N484 1994. Computer version available, Div Lib.
8. Wenham, Gordon. *Genesis*. (Waco, TX: Word Books).
9. Westermann, Claus. *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985).

Biblical encyclopedia/dictionaries

10. George A. Buttrick, ed. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. with *Supplementary Volume* (ed. Keith Crim) (New York: Abingdon, 1976). Valuable collection of articles on biblical topics. CCL Ref and SML Ref Room BS 440 I58 (LC); Div Lib Ref BS 440 I63.
11. David Noel Freedman, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992). Excellent scholarly articles on various biblical topics. CCL Ref, SML Ref, Div Lib Ref, and SML Jud. Studies Ref Room, SML 335B -- BS 440 A54x 1992 (LC).

History of Interpretation

12. S. L. Greenslade, et. al., *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, 3 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1963, 1969, 1970). SML Ref and CCL Stacks BS 445 C35 (LC); Div Lib Ref BS 445 C26.
13. James L. Kugel, *The Bible as it Was*. (Cambridge, Mass.: London, England : Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, c1997.) CCL, Stacks BS1225.2.K84X 1997 (LC). Also, *Traditions of the Bible : a guide to the Bible as it was at the start of the common era*. (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1998.) Div Lib Ref BS1225.2K85 1998
14. Oxford guide to ideas & issues of the Bible / edited by Bruce M. Metzger, Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) Div Lib Ref BS440 O934 2001
15. Oxford guide to people & places of the Bible / edited by Bruce M. Metzger, Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) ELECTRONIC RESOURCE – connect directly from Orbis.

Concordances (for word searches)

15. James Strong, *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967, 1970, 1973, 1980). SML Stacks BS 425 +S87 1970 (LC); Art and Architecture Ref BS 425 S87 1980 (LC).
16. Robert Young, *Analytical Concordance to the Bible* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1955). SML Ref BS 425 +Y68 1955 (LC).

Exegetical Method

These notes are not exhaustive or normative. They are intended as a guide to the understanding of a biblical passage, and not all will be relevant in each case. The steps listed here are also not progressive.

1. Focus on 1-3 key verses, or parts of verses in your passage and formulate an interpretive question regarding each. You have been doing this in your discussion sections all along. For example, in Gen 22 key verses and interpretive questions are v. 1 (what does it mean for God to put someone to a test?), v. 5 (why does Abraham tell the servants that he and Isaac will return from the mountain?), v. 8 (what does Abraham mean when he says that God will provide the ram, and does Isaac suspect the truth?), and v. 12 (why does God know only now that Abraham fears him?).
2. Text: By comparing translations and consulting commentaries you will be able to determine if there are any significant textual variants or ambiguities of translation that might bear on your interpretation of the verse. If there are variants, is it possible to determine which is a better or more original reading?
3. Context: Look at your verses in their immediate context. Do they belong to a larger literary unit and do they serve a particular function there? Do other verses in the context shed light on the meaning of the verses you are interpreting? How do your verses derive meaning from the surrounding material?
4. Literary Style: Are there any striking literary devices, such as metaphor, parallelism, repetition, word play? Are there significant words or themes that recur in the Bible (check a Concordance)? If so, is their use in other contexts similar or different? How do such literary devices and recurring words or themes affect the meaning of the verses you are interpreting.
5. Background: Check on other biblical sources that shed light on the vocabulary, form, function or style of your verses. You may certainly go beyond the references provided if you so choose.
6. Literary history: Is the passage a coherent unit, the work of one author or does it show signs of a complex literary history (e.g., inconsistencies that suggest a combination of sources, or signs of editing)? (Note: you do not have to consider source critical theories in order to develop an interpretation of your passage. If you do, you must still account for the final form of the passage – how it signifies given the combination of two or more sources).
7. Meaning: Asking a series of questions might help you consider the problem of meaning: What did your verses mean to their author(s)? What might they have meant to an Ancient Israelite audience? What meanings have been assigned to these verses by the traditional Jewish and Christian commentators you consulted, and how did they arrive at those meanings?

Additional Information and Hints

1. Biblical citations do not require a footnote. Just provide the citation in parentheses after the quote, e.g., "When God began creating..." (Gen 1:1).
2. Articles in encyclopedia/dictionaries should be listed by author of the individual article e.g., Author, "Title of Article," Book or Reference Work, editor (city:publisher, date) volume number (if any), page numbers.
3. Pay attention to the footnotes and bibliographies in the books and articles you use. These citations will supplement the references and resources provided here.
4. When an author cites a biblical passage or verse in support of his or her argument CHECK IT OUT. Does the passage really support the point he or she is trying to make?

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