

Women in the Bible

Stevenson 36

Rabbi Shlomie Chein

Course Description:

This will be a seminar style course in which we will sharpen analytical skills by closely examining and critically analyzing biblical narratives focusing on female characters. The Bible is multifaceted and a rich source of interpretation; its stories simultaneously enthrall the minds of children while attracting the intense scrutiny of seasoned academics. This clearly discernible contrast inspires deep appreciation for attentive reading. Furthermore, its interpretive versatility, indicative in the diverse audience it draws and varied works it inspires, makes it highly suitable for developing analytic, critical and creative thinking skills.

Through the subject matter—women in the Bible—we will endeavor to identify biblical perspectives on various women's issues as well as broader topics, and analyze how these ideas are communicated in the biblical narrative.

We will analyze stories about heroism, betrayal, love, loyalty, infidelity, motherhood and leadership, while learning to be attentive to repetition, juxtaposition, type-scenes, understatement and selective overstatement, among other characteristics of the biblical narrative. We will also explore the classic Jewish methodologies of biblical interpretation known as PaRDeS; a Hebrew acronym referring to contextual, homiletic, allegorical and mystical approaches to interpreting the text. Students will incorporate all of the above into their own analyses of the biblical narratives, and participate in peer discussions in which we will have the opportunity to hear and critique various understandings of the same reading. Overall, the course experience will sharpen students' interpretive and analytical skills through close readings, guided discussions, and written assignments that emphasize the ability to construct coherent arguments concerning the underlying meaning(s) of biblical texts, both in isolation and in relation to other narratives.

Readings:

Required:

Selections of the Hebrew Bible (translated)

Selections from Barry Holtz, *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*

Suggested:

Aviva Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious*

Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of the Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics*

Select commentary from *Rashi* (a medieval Jewish exegete) and *Midrash* (classic rabbinic biblical interpretation)

Course Requirements:

Students will be required to read selections from *Back to the Sources* as well as translated sections of the Hebrew Bible and submit a one to two-page analysis of their reading by 5:00pm on the day prior to each class. (Email it to me schein1@ucsc.edu) The analysis must include one or more of the following:

questions, critique, answers concerning the narrative; possible intended meanings of the story, how they are communicated, and/or why they might have been conveyed in this format. These should be your own original analyses/ideas, and as the course progresses should begin to incorporate methodologies discussed in *Back to the Sources* and class lectures. A mere synopsis of the reading will not be considered sufficient.

During class students will be randomly selected to present their paper/thoughts to the class for peer discussion. Everyone is required to be involved in these discussions. At the end of the course, in lieu of a final exam, students will be required to write a five to seven page paper in which they construct a coherent argument concerning one of the female personalities or biblical narratives we have explored, providing “proof-texts” where necessary.

Each class will require 3.5 hours of class time, and approximately 11-12 hours of reading/writing time.

Grading:

Grades will be evaluated on the following basis:

- Attendance/participation: 30% (more than 2 absences can result in being dropped from the class)
- Class papers (submitted, on time, quality): 30%
- Final essay: 40%

Course Outline:

Section I - *Setting the Tone: Life, Womanhood, and Motherhood*

Class 1 - Eve: *Forbidden Knowledge*

- a. Eve. *Genesis 1:1-31, 2:4-25, 3:1-24*
- b. *Back to the Sources*, Introduction.

Class 2 - Sarah and Rebecca: *Womanhood and Motherhood*

- a. Sarah. *Genesis 11:27-32, 12:1-20, 17:(1)15-22, 18:1-15, 20:1-18, 21:1-8, 23:1-20.*
- b. Hagar. *Genesis 16:1-16, 21:9-21*
- c. Rebecca. *Genesis: 22:20-24, 24:1-67, 25:19-34, 26:1-11, 26:34-35, 27:1-46, 28:1-5.*
- d. *Back to the Sources*, Biblical Narrative, part 1 pp. 31-51.

Class 3 – Rachel, Leah, and Hannah: *Barren, Fertile and Prayer*

- a. Rachel & Leah. *Genesis 29:1-35, 30:1-24, 31:1-35, 35:16-20*
- b. Hannah. *I Samuel 1:1-28, 2:1-21*
- c. *Back to the Sources*, Biblical Poetry.

Section II – *The Promiscuous and the Powerful*

Class 4 - Incest and Adultery: *Wanting What You Can't Have*

- a. Daughter's of Lot. *Genesis 19.*
- b. Potiphar's Wife. *Genesis 39:1-23.*
- c. Tamar & Amnon. *Samuel II, chapters 13 and 14*
- d. *Back to the Sources*, Biblical Narrative, part 2 pp. 52-81.

Class 5 – Leadership: To Lead and to Challenge

- a. Yocheved & Miriam. (*Genesis: 46:8-27*) *Exodus: 1:8-22, 2:1-10, 6:16-20. Numbers: 26:58-60. Exodus: 15:20-12. Numbers: 12:1-16, 20:1-2.*
- a. Devorah & Yael. *Judges: 4:1-24, (5:1-31).*
- b. *Back to the Sources*, Midrash part 1 pp. 177-197.

Class 6 - Renegades: Crossing Enemy Lines

- a. Princess of Egypt. *Exodus 2:1-10.*
- b. Rahav. *Joshua 2:1-24.*
- c. Delilah. *Judges 16:(1)4-31.*
- d. Abigail. *I Samuel 24:1-22; 25:1-42; 26:1-25.*
- e. *Back to the Sources*, Midrash part 2 pp. 197-211.

Class 7 - Esther: A Name to Remember

- a. *The book of Esther.*
- b. *Back to the Sources*, Medieval Bible Commentaries part 1 pp. 213-242

Section III – A Deeper Look

Class 8 - Ruth: The Road Less Traveled

- a. *The book of Ruth.*
- b. *Back to the Sources*, Medieval Bible Commentaries part 2 pp. 242-259

Class 9 - Behind the Veil: Mystical Interpretations

- a. Tamar & Judah. *Genesis 38.*
- b. Rachel and Leah revisited, a *mystical reading*
- c. *Back to the Sources*, Kabbalistic Texts

Class 10 – Encounters with Prophets: When You're Left with Nothing

- a. The Widow and Elijah. *I Kings 16:29-34, ch. 17*
- b. Requests from Elisha. *II Kings 4:1-37*
- c. Two Harlots & King Solomon. *Kings I, 3:(1)16-28.*
- d. *Back to the Sources*, Teachings of the Hassidic Masters