

SYLLABUS

Course Description

This is a foundational course that prepares students for biblical studies at PTS. It traces the unified narrative of the Bible through its constituent parts in the Old and New Testaments. This course explores the implications of reading that narrative within the Church, and attends to historical, textual, and personal questions that affect the reading of the Church's Bible.

Course Objectives

Students will become more conscious of the Bible as a book thoroughly from God and given by thoroughly human means.

Students will develop both their ability to read a text of Scripture as if it was the only thing they knew about God, and also their ability to read Scripture's texts and books in view of the whole canon.

Students will develop Bible reading skills such as genre recognition, reading narrative carefully, and background studies, to prepare them for a lifetime of Bible reading and for further graduate studies of Scripture.

Students will develop their ability to draw from the Scripture its application for their own spiritual development and for their own ministries.

Students will develop a sense of communion with the interpretive work of the Church through the ages, learning from other understandings of Scripture.

Course Texts

These texts are available at the Providence Bookstore, 1-204-433-7110 or 1-800-668-7768; email: bookstore@prov.ca.

Bartholomew, Craig and Michael Goheen. *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.

Tate, Randolph. *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*. Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1991, 1997, 2008.

Course Requirements

Due Dates and General Essay Guidelines: Due dates are on the Course Schedule below.

Late assignments lose a mark a week, beginning midnight of the due date. Most explanations receive sympathy and also the lost mark per week.

All submissions should follow Kate L. Turabian's *A Manual for Writers*, 7th ed., 2007, the standard guide for Providence Theological Seminary. Students can mail paper copy or send papers as email attachments, in which case they should be in MS Word format. In keeping with Turabian, use #12 Times New Roman font, and do not justify the right margin. Do not expand margins or increase font size if your paper is too short, or reduce margins and font size if it is too long. I have graded far too many papers, and can see the deviation instantly, at which point you have two problems: paper too long, and bad page setup as well. Stick to the standards, and let the paper be too short or too long. Proof read all your work.

Note that single-spaced writing places an extra space between paragraphs. Double-spaced writing, however, does not put any extra space between paragraphs, only the same double-space as occurs between all the other lines.

Weekly Discussion. There are ten weekly audio lectures. Each unit includes a discussion question, based on the content of that unit's lecture. Weekly responses to these questions, and also to the responses of other students, will count toward the final grade. Longer is not necessarily better, but thoughtful is always better. 10%

Book Study on Ruth and Colossians. Write two papers, one on Ruth and one on Colossians, 5-7 pages of double-spaced text in each. Each paper should have the following five parts. **Due dates:** *Book Study of Ruth due on March 5th. Book Study of Colossians due on April 2nd.* 15% each.

1. *Deductions about audience and setting.* Describe whatever you can learn about the audience and setting of the book (writer and audience) just from reading and re-reading Ruth/Colossians carefully. When was it written? What did the audience know and not know? What kind of relationship exists between the writer and the audience? In what kind of situation does the audience find itself? (Do NOT make an outline from these questions – they merely illustrate the kind of questions you should ask.) Do no research at all outside of reading the Scripture carefully. Do not use a study Bible. What are you quite sure about, and about what are you uncertain? *Always indicate what it was in the Scripture that led you to your conclusion.*
2. *Deductions about God.* If this book (Ruth or Colossians) was your only source of information about God, what would you know? Don't look for things you want to find. Rather, pretend you knew NOTHING before you read this book, and now you know only what you learned from this book.

3. *Deductions about purpose.* Based on your reading, why was this book written? Assume that the writer wants to correct his/her audience, or scold, or help, or encourage, or comfort, or motivate in some other way. What does the writer want to accomplish? In different words, what response does the writer hope for in the audience? Always indicate what it was in the text that led you to these conclusions.

4. *Research about audience and setting.* Then read sources that give information about audience and background to the writing. Look at Bible dictionaries, or Bible encyclopedias, or commentary introductions. Check two sources, and from these sources discuss the historical background: date, author, and social / religious / political context. Include in this section a paragraph evaluating your own deductions in 1, 2, and 3. Did your research change your opinions?

5. *Word to your church.* Based on parts 1-4, what would the message be to your church? Assuming that God was speaking to your faith community by this writing, what do you think he would be saying? If you were the one to present this to the church, how would you do that?

Précis of course texts. Write a 4-6 page (single-spaced) précis of *Biblical Interpretation* and another of *The Drama of Scripture*. A "précis" is a particular kind of book summary. Make sure to read, "How to Write a Précis," page 5 below. **Due dates:** *Précis of Tate, Biblical Interpretation, due Feb 19th. Précis of Bartholomew and Goheen, Drama of Scripture, due on March 19th.* 20% each.

Narrative Observations. Write two 4-6 page double-spaced papers, one on Ruth 2, in which Ruth gleans in Boaz's field, and the other on Acts 12, in which Peter escapes from prison. Note the instructions under "Narrative Analysis of Biblical Texts," page 6 below. 10% each.

The Bible contains much "narrative," that is, "history." The biblical writers do not write stories simply so that readers will know that these things happened. They did happen, but the writers have more in mind than that. Biblical writers are *always* leading their readers away from some kinds of thinking and living towards other kinds of thinking and living. These writers do this by telling their stories in particular ways. Whenever we read a story in Scripture, we should assume that events could be told in quite a few different ways, all of them truthful and accurate. The question is always, why is it told *this* way? Why is *this* included? Why is the story worded like *this*?

For example, why does Jesus' wonderful parable of the Prodigal Son end with the prodigal's father encouraging the older brother to join in the banquet? The reason is that the parable is not simply about God's great love and kindness to sinners, no matter how much we enjoy that message. That kindness and love is certainly taught in the parable, but only as backdrop to the real point. Jesus tells the story not to sinners but to Pharisees, who are refusing to join Jesus and tax

collectors in their celebration of God's forgiveness, just as the older brother will not join the celebration. By ending with the father urging the older brother, whose response Jesus deliberately omits, Jesus tells the parable in a way that makes this clear: how will the Pharisees respond? As he tells the parable, Jesus omits the older brother's answer, because Jesus leaves open to the Pharisees how they will respond to the parable. The details of the telling are deliberate.

Read the biblical texts patiently and carefully. This is not a research paper. Simply read and re-read the Scripture text, and assume the writer wants to lead us to a particular conclusion, or perhaps a cluster of conclusions. In each paper, describe what seem to you to be the things the writer draws our attention to. You might want to include things that would be natural for the writer to include but in your Scripture are ignored. At the end, try to draw these threads together and describe what you think the shape of the story intends to convey. Remember, the writer is preaching simply by how the story is told. What is the point of the sermon? **Due date:** *Book Study of Ruth and Narrative Observations on Ruth 2 due on March 5th. Book Study of Colossians and Narrative Observations on Acts 12 due on April 2nd.*

Course Schedule

- Unit 1 The Bible, its character, our expectations, the three worlds
- Unit 2 The Pentateuch (Genesis - Deuteronomy)
- Unit 3 The Former Prophets (Josh, Judges, 1&2 Sam, 1&2 Kings)
- Unit 4 The Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve)
- Unit 5 The Writings: Psalms and Wisdom (Proverbs and Ecclesiastes)
- Unit 6 Old and New Testaments: Continuity & Discontinuity
- Unit 7 The Gospels & Acts
- Unit 8 Paul's Letters
- Unit 9 General Letters
- Unit 10 Revelation and Apocalyptic

How to Write a Précis

A *précis* is a concise summary of a text. The following are some guidelines and suggestions for writing a good *précis*.

- a. Put yourself in the author's place. Your job is entirely descriptive, not critical. Imagine that you are the author and must say the same thing but in far fewer words. (A *précis* is one form of writing in which originality is *not* a virtue.)
- b. The author's name should not appear within the *précis*, since you are speaking *for*, not *about*, the author. Likewise, quotation marks never appear in a *précis*, since by definition the entire content is paraphrase, or indirect quotation. A *précis* is therefore one genre in which plagiarism is impossible (unless you crib someone else's *précis*!). A good *précis* is nevertheless a *paraphrase in one's own words*, not a pastiche of quotations. That is, you *never* write, "the author says . . ." because *you* are the author's voice. You write the *précis* as if you were the actual author, only now writing a much shorter version of the book.
- c. The *précis* should be a miniature version of the original. It should therefore have the same *structure*, though in a greatly compressed form. A good rule of thumb is to try reducing each section of original text to a paragraph or so of *précis*. (If the resulting *précis* is too long, however, you will need to compress even further.) Section numbers of subtitles may be included in the *précis*; this practice aids the reader in comparing the *précis* to the original. (But if there are *too* many of them, they become distracting; use good judgement!)
- d. At each point in the original text ask yourself what the author's main point is. Then state it briefly and directly, shorn of elaboration, examples, and supporting arguments. Go directly to the next major point, making clear the transition between them.
- e. Your *précis* should be readable and make sense to someone unfamiliar with the original. Aim for a flowing and coherent summary rather than a list of unrelated statements.

Narrative Analysis of Biblical Texts (a close reading strategy)

Characters and Characterization

- Levels of characterization (of decreasing reliability):
 1. Direct description by narrator - physical, inward thoughts. How important is it to the story?
 2. Indirect description by speech, action, by another character. How reliable is it? What does it say about the describer/describee? Are actions speaking louder than words?
 3. Description by juxtaposition with another character - how does the minor character serve as a foil? What do they highlight in the main character?

- Types of characters in the story:
 1. full fledged or round - multifaceted with a range of emotions and actions
 2. flat or typical - stereotyped. They do what we expect them to do. Little contradiction or depth
 3. agential or functionary. Minor characters who serve merely to move plot along or highlight main characters

- The narrator and the story
 - narrator is omniscient (i.e., he knows what the story is, and how it will be told) and reliable. What information is gained that otherwise we would not know? What biases/theology/morality does the narrator uphold? disapprove?
 - is narratorial commentary overt/explicit or covert/implicit?

- Who speaks in the story/is silent? how important is speech to the story? who is named and by whom? are words confirmed?

Plot Development

- What events/scenes take place? who is in each scene? what transitions are there between scenes?

- Does the narrator omit information? what does this reveal about characters and/or plot? is information revealed later in the story?

- Are expectations set up in the story fulfilled?

- Is story line broken by explanatory remarks, summaries, retrospectives?

- Does story confirm narrator's ideology? comment on it? contradict it?

- What is the time sequencing of the plot:
 - are there "gaps" in the story?
 - does time flow sequentially? simultaneously? backtrack? mixed up?
 - what is the speed of the narrative? does it slow down? speed up? where and why?

Point of View

- Through whose eyes do we see the story - narrator, main character etc. Does this change?
- What markers are used to indicate change in point of view (e.g., "behold", "and then" etc.)
- Is point of view "close up" or "far away" in terms of space? near or distant from story in terms of time? is point of view (dis)similar to narrator's ideology?
- Does point of view reveal the inner person (i.e. inner thoughts?)

Repetitive Elements/Style

- Are words, phrases, speeches repeated? is this repetition identical to the first occurrence? what is added/deleted? does it contradict, confirm, comment on first occurrence? Do repetitions reveal possible combination of sources - if so, how does repetition function in the final form of the text?
- Are verb types repetitive? is word order repetitive?
- What metaphors are used?

See the following for narrative analysis techniques and theory: Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*; Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*; Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*; and Meir Sternberg, *Poetics and Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*; Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*.