

**Winter/Spring Term 2023**

**Sacred Texts 150 Course Syllabus**

**In the Beginning:**

**Classic Christian and Jewish Pathways to Understanding the Book of Genesis**

**Huron University College Land Acknowledgment**

Huron is situated on the traditional lands of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Attawandaron, and Lenape peoples, whose sharing and stewardship of the land has been governed by the Dish with One Spoon treaty since time immemorial. We are guided by this treaty in the spirit of peace, friendship, and respect. Huron University College acknowledges its past role in perpetuating colonial and exclusionary relations. Because religious and ecclesial institutions were instrumental in such relations, we consider it our particular responsibility as a Faculty of Theology to work towards justice and reconciliation.

**Course Dates:** From February 2nd – March 23rd, 2023

**Time:** Thursdays from 7 – 9 P.M. (CT), 8 – 10 P.M. (ET)

**Delivery:** Hosted via Zoom

**Instructor:** Dr. Murray Watson, SSL [Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome], PhD [Trinity College, Dublin]

**Email:** jmkwatson@gmail.com

**Phone:** (519) 331-3213

I am available to help or support you in any ways I can. Please feel free to e-mail me at any time, or we can arrange a mutually convenient time for a video conversation.

**Course Description**

“These stories [in the early chapters of Genesis] have provided a foundation for three of the world’s major religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Furthermore, arguably, these pages also provide the foundations on which Western civilization as we know it today has been built. Indeed, few questions are more fundamental to human existence than *Who am I? Where did I come from? What is my place in this world?* The earliest chapters of Genesis have oriented hearers and readers for millennia in their attempts to address these concerns.” (Daniel D. Lowery, *Toward A Poetics of Genesis 1-11: Reading Genesis 4:17-22 in Its Near Eastern Context.* Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplements. Eisenbrauns, 2013, p. 1)

The first book of the Jewish and Christian Bible is one of the foundational documents of Western culture, and it is rich in poetry, symbolism and spiritual meanings. But it has also been at the centre of some of the greatest debates in religious history—around creation and evolution, literalism versus symbolism, the nature of God, the originality (or not) of its characters and stories, and its role in shaping our attitudes toward the environment. These are some of the most familiar texts in the Old Testament, and yet they continue to yield fascinating new layers of meaning through the application of ancient and modern methods of study. By drawing upon some of the most insightful interpreters from the early Jewish and Christian traditions (including ancient rabbis and the Fathers of the Church), this course will look at these questions using a “reception history” approach, examining how those writers and commentators can help us—even today—to grasp the beauty, nuance, power, playfulness, and meanings of some of the core texts of the Judæo-Christian tradition.

**Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes**

At the end of this course, students will be conversant with, and will have examined, a representative cross-section of rabbinic and patristic sources for Biblical interpretation (in English translation). They will have a clear sense of the distinctive approach to the Bible taken by classic Jewish and Christian interpreters, its difference from modern historical-critical methodologies, and some of its influence on the Jewish and Christian traditions that grew out of the first millennium of the Common Era. The course will examine both the challenges which these early interpreters pose for us today, and some of their enduring relevance for prayer, devotion, teaching and preaching key portions of the book of Genesis. It will offer students a range of contemporary sources on rabbinic and patristic Biblical interpretation that can be helpful to them in their own ministry and/or further study.

**Learning Resources**

Base translation for our study: Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary and Notes* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005); provided in electronic format:

Genesis Chapters 1 to 4: https://drive.google.com/file/d/13\_o0UOT0o7fBqobxomLtY4f63tMpox4O/view?usp=share\_link

Genesis Chapters 6 to 9: https://drive.google.com/file/d/114e-m0J3467ySfBdKrI3H0RLsaXarZ4a/view?usp=share\_link

Genesis Chapter 22: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1a5ZzGRAnydlMkd0CDm6o34PfWEb0wAZU/view?usp=share\_link

***Plus:***Another version (of your choice) for comparison, in English or another vernacular language that you read comfortably (online or in print)

Selected excerpts from James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was At the Start of the Common Era* (Harvard University Press, 1998; provided in electronic format)

Selected excerpts from Andrew Louth, ed. *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Genesis 1-11* (InterVarsity Press, 2001)

*For All the Saints: Prayers and Readings for Saints’ Days According to the Calendar of the Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada.* Compiled by Stephen Reynolds (ABC Publishing, 2007); available online at: https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/ForAlltheSaints.pdf (good for biographical information on many Fathers of the Church)

The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, *God’s Unfailing Word: Theological and Practical Perspectives on Christian–Jewish Relations* (Church House Publishing/ Archbishops’ Council, 2019); available online at: https://www.churchofengland.org/media/18977

Other supplementary resources will be provided as the course progresses.

***Note:*** Students will be expected to have read the Biblical text under discussion prior to each week’s class.

**Weekly Course Outline**

**Course Pre-Reading**

Before the first class, you are encouraged to read and reflect on Barbara Brown Taylor’s reflection “The Dominion of Love” (from *The Green Bible.* Zondervan Publishing, 2011): https://drive.google.com/file/d/130QtcMDFWGu\_sCsa31pkXlOk2FSiy65h/view?usp=share\_link

**Week 1**

Course Overview and Expectations; Orientation to the Book of Genesis and Its Importance; Glossary of Terms (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qlNi4G1ra2k69KWrBHBodMnszyP6F2w3/view?usp=share\_link )

Understanding Traditional Jewish and Patristic Approaches to the Bible: Their Assumptions and Methodologies; The Importance of Detail—and of Asking “Why”

John L. Thompson, *Reading the Bible With the Dead: What You Can Learn From the History of Exegesis That You Can’t Learn From Exegesis Alone* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 1-11: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-iPpzXeGCEnfhRFebr\_E2-5pK\_AHU-Qe/view?usp=share\_link

**Week 2**

Traditional Jewish Approaches to Genesis 1:1-2:3 (The First Creation Account)

**Week 3**

Traditional Christian Approaches to Genesis 1:1-2:3 (The First Creation Account)

**Week 4**

Traditional Jewish and Christian Approaches to Genesis 2:3-24 (The Second Creation Account)

**Week 5**

Traditional Jewish & Christian Approaches to Genesis 2:25-3:24 (The First Human Rebellion and Its Consequences)

**Week 6**

Traditional Jewish & Christian Approaches to Genesis 6-9 (The Story of Noah and the Great Flood)

**Week 7**

Some Contemporary Jewish & Christian Approaches to Genesis 22:1-19 (The Story of the Binding/Sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham)

**Week 8**

Course Wrap-Up; Concluding Discussion & Questions

**Method of Evaluation and Criteria for Grading** (only for students choosing to be evaluated for full course credit)

Two document studies (500 words each) and a Final Essay (1000 words) will be completed by each student seeking evaluation for full LTh credit.

1. Class Engagement/Participation – 20%

2. Document Study – 20%

3. Document Study – 20%

4. Final Essay – 40%

Each assignment should be submitted either as a Microsoft Word document (attached to an e-mail), as a Google Document, or pasted into the body of an e-mail. Please use a standard 12-point font. If an extension is necessary, please contact me in advance to let me know, and to decide together on a new due date.

**Assignment #1 (Due on or before our Week 4 class)**

Jonathan Sacks (1948-2020) was one of the most brilliant, influential and highly-esteemed Jewish figures in the modern English-speaking world. From 1991 to 2013, he served as the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, and he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2005. Although he died in 2020, his extensive writings (online and in print) continue to provide inspiration and enlightenment for many people who seek to understand Judaism and Jewish ways of approaching the Scriptures. For more background: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jonathan-Sacks

Choose **one** of the provided Torah commentaries by Chief Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks on one of the passages we have examined in this course. Read Rabbi Sacks’ interpretations of the text slowly, carefully and reflectively. In two single-spaced pages (roughly 500 words), share your answers to the following questions:

1. What in Rabbi Sacks’ commentary was already *fairly familiar to me* from other sources/courses?
2. What did I read in Rabbi Sacks’ comments that was *new, surprising, or revelatory to me?* How did it open up new ways of thinking about this text that I had perhaps not considered before?
3. Are there any areas where I would disagree with, or question, Rabbi Sacks’ ideas? Why?
4. If I were preaching on this text, or leading a Bible study group, how could I incorporate some of Rabbi Sacks’ ideas in ways that would make this passage relevant and interesting to others?

**Rabbi Sacks’ commentaries are available online at:** https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1aX5XTmNfJiLb81AUpfaa9M-HyWjUIrMt?usp=share\_link(subdivided according to the Jewish weekly reading, or *parashah,* they refer to)

**Assignment #2 (Due on or before our Week 7 class)**

Read either:

1. Robert L. Wilken, “The Christianizing of Abraham: The Interpretation of Abraham in Early Christianity,” in *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (1972; Vol. 43, Article 76); online at: https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol43/iss1/76
**OR**
2. Edward Kessler, “Genesis 22.6-8: Abraham’s and Isaac’s Journey to Moriah,” in: *Jews, Christians and Muslims in Encounter* (London: SCM Press, 2013), pp. 120-29 (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zK\_HqR-zv01sULKsKQdhJi4njIo6R4mA/view?usp=share\_link )

In two single-spaced pages (roughly 500 words), share your reflections on the following questions:

What do you find intriguing or interesting in the discussion of how these Biblical texts have been interpreted and expanded upon by early Jewish and Christian authors and sources?

In what ways can you admire, appreciate or benefit from, the interpretive directions of these authors and sources?

In what ways do you think these authors go *too far* in their interpretations?

What “spiritual nugget” could you draw from the article you read, which could help you and others to understand these key parts of Genesis in ways that can be spiritually enriching, or helpful for prayer and devotion?

**Assignment #3 (Due within a week after the last class)**

For one of the passages we have looked at, choose one of the rabbinic and one of the patristic sources we have explored on this text, which you personally found helpful or insightful.

You have been invited to be the guest preacher at a local church on this Biblical passage. Develop a sermon/homily that draws upon the wisdom of those Jewish and Christian sources to help your listeners “unpack” the meaning of that text for their own daily lives. You will need to (briefly) introduce the sources you’ve chosen (for those unfamiliar with them), and you may need to offer a little historical background context to help your listeners to situate them. Focus your sermon on: (1) the Biblical text itself—make this the focal point of your preaching; (2) relevance to the lives of your “congregation”; (3) how these patristic and rabbinic sources can still speak to us today, and can help us to think about the Bible in meaningful ways. Try to “preach” in a way that you yourself would find helpful and inspiring on a Sunday morning.

**Huron Grade Descriptors**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  A+   |  90-100    |  One could scarcely expect better from a student at this level |
|  A |  80-89   |  Superior work which is clearly above average |
|  B |  70-79 |  Good work, meeting all requirements, and eminently satisfactory |
|  C |  60-69 |  Competent work, meeting requirements |
|  D   |  50-59 |  Fair work, minimally acceptable |
|  F |  below 50 |  Fail |

**Student Code of Conduct**

Membership in the community of Huron University College and Western University implies acceptance by every student of the principle of respect for the rights, responsibilities, dignity and well-being of others and a readiness to support an environment conducive to the intellectual and personal growth of all who study, work, and live within it. Upon registration, students assume the responsibilities that such registration entails. While in the physical or online classroom, students are expected to behave in a manner that supports the learning environment of others. Please review the Student Code of Conduct at: https://huronatwestern.ca/sites/default/files/Res%20Life/Student%20Code%20of%20Conduct%20-%20Revised%20September%202019.pdf.

**Statement on the Recording of Class Activities**

Students may not record or distribute any class activity, including conversations during office hours, without written permission from the instructor, except as necessary as part of approved accommodations for students with disabilities. Any approved recordings may only be used for the student’s own private use.

Online courses within the Licentiate in Theology Program are recorded for student engagement purposes. These recording are only used by the registered students of the class and made available through a restricted video hosting site to respect both privacy and intellectual property. Should a student be uncomfortable with this practice, they can contact the course instructor or the LTh Program Director, Dr. Grayhame Bowcott at grayhame.bowcott@huron.uwo.ca

**Support Services**

For advice on course selections, degree requirements, and for assistance with requests for medical accommodation, students should contact the LTh Program Director, Dr. Grayhame Bowcott at grayhame.bowcott@huron.uwo.ca.



THIS COURSE HAS BEEN APPROVED BY HURON’S FACULTY OF THEOLOGY COMMITTEE

FOR THE WINTER/SPRING TERM OF THE LTH PROGRAM, 2023.