

## English 4461: The Bible as Literature

TR 11:20-12:45

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Whether you are a devout fundamentalist, staunch atheist, or a cautious skeptic, you will find this to be an exciting and engaging course.

We will begin with a consideration of the composition and canonical processes by which the Hebrew Bible (or, Old Testament as it is referred to in Christian bibles) reached its current form and then spend about four weeks considering much of the literature, personalities, and major narrative themes of the Old Testament. We will consider these themes within their ancient literary and cultural contexts. As a transition into the New Testament and because much of the New Testament literature concerns itself with apocalyptic themes, we will consider selections of Jewish Apocalyptic literature composed during the Second Temple Period (ca. 536 B.C.E.-70 C.E.)—Daniel, *1 Enoch*, *Psalms of Solomon*—and apocalyptic themes, including the concern with the problem of evil (theodicy) and the literary development of angels and demons and heaven and hell during the period.

As we begin our examination of the New Testament (week 5 or 6), we will spend some time discussing the fascinating composition and canonical processes by which this influential body of texts has reached its current form. We will then spend some time with the enigmatic Paul, whose letters (at least those that were possibly written by him) represent the earliest extant Christian literature (probably written between 50-60 C.E.). Through a close reading of several of these letters, we will come to recognize his rhetorical skill and that he was an extremely controversial figure—engaged in heated debate with other early followers of Jesus, including Peter, as his letters reflect these controversies.

From Paul's letters, we'll move on, chronologically, to read and discuss the gospels. The gospels within the New Testament are complicated texts because there is an undeniable literary relationship between Mark, Matthew, and Luke. This literary relationship is referred to as the "Synoptic Problem," and we will spend some time considering the problem and the interrelationships within these texts both before and while reading through them carefully. By way of a teaser, a close reading of these texts will suggest that the author of Matthew read Mark, disagreed with much of it, and, while using Mark's narrative as an outline, significantly altered (rewrote) much of Mark to reflect his own point of view. Then, the author Luke read both Mark and Matthew and disagreed with much of what he read, used Mark as his basic outline, and then significantly altered (rewrote) both Mark and Matthew to reflect his still different perspectives. Again, it is these interesting literary relationships that make these texts so fascinating to study as literary works.

The author of Luke also wrote Acts, so we will consider Acts after Luke. Acts is purportedly a (or THE) historical narrative of the earliest days / years of the developing Christian movement. Another view of Acts, however, is that its author created an essentially fictitious narrative with fictitious speeches that and characters who attempt to whitewash the several controversies within the early church and, instead, present the early history of the movement as one of complete harmony rather than of widespread contention. We will consider both views as we read the text closely.

We will close out the semester with a consideration of a selection of the so-called Catholic epistles, Pastoral epistles, and Revelation, and, if time permits, maybe *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*.

We will use *The Oxford Study Bible* (no exceptions) and read much, but not all, of it very carefully. On occasion, we will substitute or supplement the *OSB* with other texts and I will upload many handouts and other materials to the course's UMdrive site. Students will keep careful class notes, as they will be extremely helpful for the weekly quizzes, the two exams, and then the final.

Class discussion and participation are strongly encouraged.