**Biblical Poetry: The Song of Songs** (Fall 2014)

Many biblical poetic texts are considered to be literary masterpieces; the finest of them all is probably the Song of Songs (שירי השירים). In NEJS 121b, we will read the entirety of the Song in Hebrew and will discuss its interpretation in detail. (All class discussion will be in English.) We will concentrate on the literal interpretation of the song; students should feel comfortable discussing issues pertaining to love, desire, sex, and the erotic, which are all central to the Song. This course has several goals: developing skills in advanced biblical grammar; furthering skills in biblical interpretation; exploring the dynamics of biblical poetry; understanding how biblical books develop; evaluating scholarly arguments in secondary literature as a prelude to developing sound arguments; understanding parts and the whole of the Song of Songs; and seeing how biblical notions of the love, sex, and the erotic have or have not changed over time.

Intermediate knowledge of biblical Hebrew (NEJS 10a or equivalent) is assumed as a prerequisite; additional skills needed for serious study of the Hebrew Bible will be taught during the semester. Students who have not had formal Biblical Hebrew must become familiar with my *Biblical Hebrew for Students of Modern Israeli Hebrew*, especially chapters 1-7, 18-19, and must work carefully through the material on my
website at: http://people.brandeis.edu/~brettler/biblehelp/brettler.html, and should talk to me during the first week of class to make sure that their background is adequate for this class.

You will be expected to prepare for each class seriously, using the commentaries available on reserve and in Judaica reference as well as the lexica and grammars. You should use the commentaries by the following authors: Barbiero, Blochs, Exum, Fox, Keel, Murphy, Pope, and Stoop-van Paridon. Students who can work with the medieval commentaries are welcome to use this in addition to the modern critical commentaries.

We will begin by introducing major issues of the Song. You are then expected to prepare the Hebrew text very carefully and completely for each class; class participation will count for 30% of your grade. (You may “pass” twice during the semester, including absences, but you must email or tell me before class that you are passing.) It will always be clear what we are covering—sometimes we will look at several verses in great detail, while other times we will cover a unit or a topic. Four written take home assignments (out of five) on grammatical and literary points, or summarizing articles, will count for 40% of your grade. An in-class oral presentation on a book or a section of a book will comprise 30% of your grade. There will be no final examination.

You must bring a Hebrew Bible to each class, as well as a separate copy of the Hebrew text of the Song, Xeroxed from BHS and BHQ (or on your computer).

If you have any documented special needs, please share these with me as soon as possible, and certainly before any assignments are due.

1. August 28: Introduction
Goals of the course.

2. September 2: Background to the Song
Read the Song several times in Hebrew or in English. If possible, read several different translations. What are the major issues of interpretation of the Song? After you think through this issue, compare your answers to those found in the introductions to the commentaries by Exum, Murphy and Keel as well as Marcia Falk, Love Lyrics from the
Bible, 54-107 and to my essay “Unresolved and Unresolvable Problems in Interpreting the Song,” in Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs, ed. P. S. Hawkins and L. C. Stahlberg, 185-198. Try to get some sense of the introduction to Pope’s commentary, but you need not read it all (unless you have much time on your hands.)

3. September 4: Background to Love, Sex and Eros in Ancient Israel

Depending on your background, read at least 100 pages of the following; you should become familiar with all of these:
In dealing with specific poetic issues, the following two works are especially helpful; peruse them and learn how to use them: Wilfred G. E. Watson, Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques and Luis Alonso Schockel, A Manual of Hebrew Poetics.
In addition, find and read one additional general article on biblical poetry and post a 200-300-word summary of it on latte (due 24-hrs before class).

5. September 11: Intro to Textual Criticism (=TC)—BHS and BHQ
Read the preface and introduction (pp. xvii-22) to Emanuel Tov’s 3rd edition of Textual
Criticism of the Hebrew Bible (Judaica Reference) for an overview of the subject of TC, and familiarize yourself with the sigla. For additional introductory material, read P. Kyle McCarter, Textual Criticism: Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible. For a general introduction to BHQ, read A. Schenker’s “General Introduction” to BHQ, and for an introduction to the TC issues of our text, read P. B. Dirksen’s “Introduction to Canticles” in BHQ (both on LATTE). Begin to work through the TC issues in Ch. 1 of the Song and be prepared to discuss your findings in class. Make sure that you can define the meaning of the sigla found in Ch. 1. **TC questions:** 1) What is the goal of Textual Criticism? 2) How does one go about evaluating the weight of the textual witnesses; i.e. why is the LXX more or less important than the Syriac? 3) What are the advantages or disadvantages for prioritizing the MT over other textual witnesses? 4) What are the most important textual witnesses to the Song and why?

6ff. **September 16 and following: The Text of the Song of Songs**
We will spend the rest of the semester working through the entire Song in Hebrew. As noted above, you are expected to prepare with the commentaries and other tools. You are encouraged to read selected articles cited in the commentaries.

**October 14th and 16th: ḳašfs in the Song**
On Tuesday, we will look at the bodily descriptions of the Song in detail and compare and contrast them with one another. Come to class prepared to discuss research methods in finding information on ḳašfs in the Song. For class on Thursday, we will discuss the content of the ḳašfs in the Song and compare and contrast them with similar descriptions in other ancient and modern poetry. Think about the wider implications of such behavior for an anthropological construct of describing desired partners. How do descriptions of the female/male body compare and contrast with similar descriptions in Egyptian or Mesopotamian literature, modern R&B or Hip-Hop music, etc? Are there similarities in form or structure? Are parts of the body similarly compared with natural and societal phenomena? Post a 150-word discussion on LATTE concerning the ḳašfs in the Song and their comparison with non-biblical poetic descriptions (ancient or modern of your choice) (Due: Oct 15th at 2pm).
23-24. **December 2 and 4: Synthesis**

We will deal with synthetic issues concerning the Song, its structure and its interpretation.

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**More on the Oral Presentation:**

You will each give a short oral presentation (approximately one-two weeks after midterms) on one secondary work on the Song. Here are some books you might present, arranged by topic:

*Comparative approaches:*


Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature*.

Giulia Sissa, *Sex and Sensuality in the Ancient World*.

*The Erotic in the Bible:*


Michael Coogan, *God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says*.


Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*.

*Feminist Approaches to the Song:*

Athalya Brenner, ed. *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*.


Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*.
Monographs and collected essays on the Song:

Elie Assis, *Flashes of Fire: A Literary Analysis of the Song of Songs*.
Fiona C. Black, *The Artifice of Love: Grotesque Bodies and the Song of Songs*.
André LaCocque, *Romance She Wrote: A Hermeneutical Essay on Song of Songs*.
Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs*.
Christopher Meredith, *Journeys in the Songscape: Space and the Song of Songs*.
Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: A Study in the Poetic Language of the Songs of Songs*.
Scott B. Noegel and Gary A. Rendsburg, eds., *Solomon’s Vineyard: Literary and Linguistic Studies in the Song of Songs*.
Carey Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs*. 