NEJS 121B: Biblical Poetry
Spring 2017
M, W 2:00-3:20 PM
Professor Jacqueline Vayntrub

I. Course Description

Much of the Hebrew Bible and its many genres could be described as ‘poetry.’ But what exactly falls in this category? What are its boundaries? This graduate-level seminar provides an overview of biblical poetry, its major genre categories, and the various ways biblical scholarship has understood this mode of discourse. Where helpful for outlining or challenging literary categories, biblical genres will be contextualized within broader ancient Near Eastern literary traditions. Assigned biblical texts will be read in Hebrew with attention to grammar, poetic structure, and translation. This course is also an introduction to significant literary-critical ideas that have influenced scholarship on biblical poetry. The course material is divided into three major sections: (1) poetry in narrative; (2) poetry not in narrative (e.g., prophecy, lyric, praise, lament, petition, protest, incantation); (3) theorizing biblical poetry: what is the interrelationship between genres, what are the boundaries between genres and modes (poetry vs. speech; poetry vs. law). The course concludes with an inquiry into the nature of the biblical ‘poetic’ anthologies like Psalms, Proverbs, and Lamentations—and much of the Latter Prophets—and an effort to understand the organizing principles behind the formation of these major works.

The course is also aimed at translating these intellectual skills (critical inquiry, sensitivity to the reception of ancient literary traditions) into professional research skills. Graduate Students: You will be required to propose a research topic as a conference-style abstract, to turn this abstract into a in-class presentation, and to turn this presentation (along with the feedback) into a research paper. I will guide you through these practical skills along the way.

IIa. Graduate Student Course Responsibilities
1. Session leading—5%
   You will select one class session to lead. All students will need to prepare for all sessions, but the class session you select is the one you are responsible for leading the reading.
   Session leading responsibilities:
   1. Compile major organizing questions that arise from your study of the primary and secondary source material.
   2. Pose these questions to the class, and be ready to evaluate arguments that arise through a discussion of the primary and secondary sources.

2. Writing assignments (4 total)—40%
   You will complete short writing assignments based on the reading of that particular week. See schedule below for assignments. Due at the end of the week; double-spaced, usually around 3 pages maximum.

3. Conference-style talk proposal (based on research paper topic)—5%
   You will compose a 250 word abstract for your research topic, which you will turn into a conference talk. The proposed topic should come from the topics covered in the course, and you should consult with me to determine a topic and a preliminary list of secondary sources.
4. Conference-style talk—10%
Based on your abstract, you will deliver a 20 min. talk to the class; you may use handouts, power-point, or both.

5. Research paper—40%
You will turn your talk into a 15-20 page (double-spaced) research paper. Due at the end of the semester.

IIb. Undergraduate Student Course Responsibilities
1. Class participation—10%
You will come to class with the readings (primary texts and secondary materials) completed and ready to participate in the discussion.

2. Writing assignments (4 total)—40%
You will complete short writing assignments based on the reading of that particular week. See schedule below for assignments. Double-spaced, usually around 3 pages maximum.

3. Paper proposal—5%
In consultation with me, you will describe and outline your research paper topic and the sources you plan to use in one page, double spaced. (You can select one of the topics we have discussed in the course, and will use the sources in the syllabus and a few others I will assign to you)

4. Class presentation—10%
You will give a 15-20 minute presentation to the class on your research project.

5. Research paper—35%
Based on your paper proposal, you will put together a 9-11 page (double spaced) research paper. Due at the end of the semester.

General note regarding the preparation of primary sources for class:
Preparation of the primary sources for class means you are ready to read and translate the assigned text, and have consulted concordances, lexicons, grammars, and commentaries, as needed, to explain and support your translations. See “Materials and Resources” below.
III. Course Schedule and Required Reading
*indicates required reading for graduate students; optional for undergraduates

Books required for purchase
1. Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) or Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia
*see Materials and Tools section below for Lexica, Grammars, Concordances, and Commentaries*
*other readings will be posted on LATTE*

Week 1. Introduction: The Mechanics of Biblical Poetry
Wednesday, January 18
Discussion topic: Introduction to the course; how to prepare a poetic analysis of a biblical text.
Reading due:
- Syllabus

Week 2. Ancient Texts, Modern Scholarship
Monday, January 23
Discussion topic: Theorizing biblical poetry: Medieval and Early Modern
Reading due:
-Brief selections (choose two to read apart from Lowth ‘Contents’; all online)
   - M. ibn Ezra, Kitab al Muhadara (from Berlin)
   - M. ibn Tibbon, Commentary on Song of Songs (from Berlin)
   - Lowth, “Contents” Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews (required)

Wednesday, January 25
Discussion topic: The folk and structuralism: the “form” and the “text”
Reading due:
Week 3. Parallelism and Beyond

Monday, January 30
Discussion topic: Psalm 93; the mechanics of parallelism, macro- and micro-structure.
Reading due:
- review Berlin from Week 1.
Assignment (ungraded): Prepare an annotated translation and analysis (ABA’B’ etc.), following Berlin and Pardee, of Psalm 93.

Wednesday, February 1
Discussion topic: Paratexts, distinguishing between frames, narrative and non-narrative
Primary text:
2 Sam 22 and Psalm 18. pay attention to framing.
Reading due:

Part I. Poetry in Narrative
Week 4. Poetic Closure

Monday, February 6
Discussion topic: The closure of narrative episodes in J with poetry
Primary text:
Exod 15:1-18
Reading due:
Wednesday, February 8
Discussion topic: Exodus 15
Reading: same as Monday
Assignment #1 (graded):
How have these scholars differently distinguished poetry from prose? What assumptions are implicit in their distinctions? What are the limitations of these two categories? Incorporate specific examples from your reading of Exodus 15 and its narrative frame. 3 double-spaced pages.

Week 5. Praise in Narrative

Monday, February 13
Discussion topic: Prose vs. poetic narrative accounts
Primary text: Judges 5 (+review Judges 4*)
Reading due:

Wednesday, February 15
Discussion topic: Song of Deborah
Reading: same as Monday

no class February 20-24

Week 6. Lament in Narrative

Monday, February 27
Discussion topic: How speech performance functions rhetorically in narrative
Primary text: 2 Samuel 1:17-27
Reading due:
Wednesday, March 1
Discussion topic: David’s Lament
Primary text: 2 Samuel 1:17-27
Assignment #2: Prepare an annotated translation and poetic analysis of David’s Lament. In two-three double spaced pages, present an argument for how the structure of the poem informs its meaning.

Week 7. Blessing vs. Instruction in Narrative

Monday, March 6
Discussion topic: Evaluating difference between Gen 49 and Deut 33
Primary text: Gen 49 and Deut 33
Reading:
Assignment (ungraded): Prepare a translation and poetic analysis of one of the two texts.

Wednesday, March 8
Discussion topic: Deut 32 as instruction (consult speech performance frame at conclusion of Deut 31)
Primary text: Deut 32
Reading:
Assignment #3:
Discuss the framing and structure of Deuteronomy 32 in light of the readings. 3-4 pages double-spaced.

Part II. Poetry in Anthology

Week 8. Prophecy as Poetry

Monday, March 13
Discussion topic: Unraveling the multiple levels of speech performance in the Latter Prophets
Primary text: Isaiah 22
Reading:
- *Couey. 2015. “Introduction” and “The Line in First Isaiah,” Reading the Poetry of First Isaiah, 1-67. (online)
Wednesday, March 15  
Session leader:  
Discussion topic: Instruction in prophetic collections  
Primary text: Micah 2  
Reading: consult commentaries  
Assignment #4:  
Prepare a poetic analysis of Micah 2 as prophetic speech and prophetic poetry (with distinct discourse levels indicated). *For graduate students: Compare to Isaiah 22 and Couey’s reading of the poetry there.* Integrate in your discussion categories and definitions from the secondary readings. Poetic analysis + 3 page discussion, double spaced.

Week 9. Lament and Prophecy  
Monday, March 20  
Session leader:  
Discussion topic: Lament in prophetic collections  
Primary text: Ezekiel 27  
Reading:  

Wednesday, March 22  
Session leader:  
Discussion topic: Lament in collections; comparative analysis between Lamentations and Ezekiel 27. Can generic or rhetorical distinctions be drawn between these biblical texts and Micah 2?  
Primary text: Lamentations 1  
Reading: consult commentaries

Part III. Theorizing Biblical Poetry  
Week 10. Praise and Lament: Discourses of Success and Failure  
Monday, March 27  
Discussion topic: Drawing distinctions between different discourse types  
Primary texts: Psalms 6; 8; Isaiah 14:4-21  
Reading: consult commentaries  
Graduate students Conference Proposal Due: In consultation with the instructor, prepare a conference-paper abstract on which your in-class presentation and research paper will be based. 250 words.  
Undergraduates Paper Proposal and Outline Due. One page, double spaced.
Wednesday, March 29  
Session leader:  
Discussion topic: The form and function of Psalm 22  
Primary text: Psalm 22  
Reading:  

**Week 11. Doing Things with Poetry**

Monday, April 3  
Session leader:  
Discussion topic: Petition  
Primary text: 1 Sam 2  
Reading: consult commentaries

Wednesday, April 5  
Discussion: Petition, Incantation, Curse  
Primary text: Psalms 6 (redux); 12; 35; 58  
Reading:  
- Smoak. 2015. *Priestly Blessing in Inscription and Scripture*, 1-88. (online)

*no class April 10-14*

**Week 12. Praise, Gender, and the Body**

Monday, April 17  
Discussion: The poetics of description; Select one of the assigned biblical texts, prepare a detailed poetic analysis.  
Primary text: Proverbs 31:10-31; Song 5:10-16  
Reading:  
- Vayntrub. *forthcoming*. “Beauty, Wisdom, and the Poetics of Description in Prov 31:10-31” (online)

Wednesday, April 19  
Discussion: Proverbs 8  
Primary text: Proverbs 8  
Reading: consult commentaries
Week 13. In-Class Presentations

Monday, April 24
Presenter:
Presenter:
Presenter:
Presenter:

Wednesday, April 26
Presenter:
Presenter:
Presenter:
Presenter:


Monday, May 1
Presenter:
Presenter:
Presenter:
Presenter:

Wednesday, May 3
Discussion topic: Instruction, Proverb, and Law
Primary text: (selection from) Prov 1-9; 10-29
IV. Materials and Tools:
1. Bibles
   - Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS)
   - Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia (BHL)
   - Rahlfs, Septuaginta

2. Concordances
   - Mandelkern, *Concordance on the Bible* (Hebrew-Latin)
   - Even-Shoshan, *Concordance to the Bible* (Biblical Hebrew-Modern Hebrew)
   - Accordance software

3. Lexica
   - Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB), *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*
   - Koehler-Baumgartner (HALOT), *A Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*
   - Botterweck-Ringgren-Willis, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*
   - Ben-Yehuda

4. Grammars
   - Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowly (GKC), *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*
   - Waltke-O’Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*

5. Commentaries (selection)
   - International Critical Commentary (ICC)
   - Hermeneia
   - Anchor Bible
   - AB Ehrlich
     - Ranglossen zur hebräischen bibel
     - Die Psalmen
   - N.H. Tur-Sinai
     - ספרת של מקרא
     - הלשון המפר

6. Article Databases
   - JSTOR
   - ATLA
   - RAMBI
V. Bibliography for Further Reading:

Alter, Robert. 2011 (rev.) The Art of Biblical Poetry
_________. 2010. Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible
Couey, J. Blake. 2015. Reading the Poetry of First Isaiah. The Most Perfect Model of the Prophetic Poetry.
Vols. 1-4.
Harshav, Benjamin. 2014. Three Thousand Years of Hebrew Versification.
Zakovitch, Yair. 1979. The Pattern of the Numerical Sequence Three-Four in the Bible (Hebrew)