

**OT 325-3 “God of Our Weary Years”:
Black Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in the USA**
Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary
January Term 2019
Mon-Fri 5-7:30 PM

Location

Grace Hope Presbyterian Church
702 E Breckinridge St, Louisville, KY 40203

Instructor Contact

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Office Hours: email for appointment

Prerequisites

OT 100-4 Scripture 1

Course Description

In 1900, James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (often referred to as “The Negro National Anthem” or, more recently, “The Black National Anthem”) was publically performed for the first time by over 500 school children. In 2018 Beyoncé performed the anthem during her set at the record-breaking annual music festival, Coachella. The vast distance in time between these two performances speaks to the persistent relevance of Johnson’s lyrics in expressing profound tensions of disappointment and hope, oppression and resilience, which have characterized Black people’s historical and spiritual experience in the United States. This course derives its name from the start of the third stanza, “God of Our Weary Years.” This stanza evokes images of the metaphorical places where Black people met God along our historical and spiritual journeys. In this course, we are looking at the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament as one of those “paths” or “places” where Black people were able to encounter the divine; and the recurring question we will wrestle with is *how* it is that these scriptures served (and continue to serve) Black people in various contexts along our collective journey? As we analyze historical movements, academic writing, sermons, and literature, we will keep our eye toward not only content, but also the methods involved in how Black people interact with these scriptures.

Learning Goals

Students will become familiar with some of the major historical consequences, interpretive strategies, and enduring legacies involving the interaction of people of African descent living in the U.S. with the scriptures of ancient Israel (SLO 2). Through in-class activities and assignments, students will gain an in-depth knowledge of multiple, specific approaches to scripture; and students will think critically and creatively about the application of these insights to real-world contemporary issues (SLO 1 and 3).

How Learning Happens

I have structured this course to follow an emancipatory model of education. This means that the goals and process of learning for us are geared toward creating a more just and democratic society. It also means that the process of learning is not based on a unilateral sharing of packaged information, but rather fostering critical thinking, creative thinking, and collaboration. Our thought and study will be problem oriented rather than positivistic and dogmatic; more perspectival rather than relativistic; and geared toward contextual collaboration with the belief that engaging with our differences can enrich our thought and life.

Required Readings

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1937.

Junior, Nyasha. *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015.

Smith, Mitzi J. *Insights from African American Interpretation*. Reading the Bible in the 21st Century. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017.

Contract Grading

The contract grading system below has been implemented in order to facilitate an environment that aligns with the emancipatory model of education. This system should foster more collaborative (rather than competitive) interactions and ease tensions about “making-the-grade.” Based upon your individual learning goals, each student can choose how much work to do for this course and expect a grade within the range displayed below.

C Level Work:

1. Active participation in class and group discussions
2. Explanation of your goal(s) for this course (1-2 paragraphs)
3. Title and Footnotes assignment (2 paragraphs)
4. Two 2-page reflection papers on required readings
5. 1 or 2-page response to another student’s Title and Footnotes assignment
6. Group Presentation

B Level Work:

1. All the requirements of the previous level
2. Four 2-page reflection papers on required readings
3. 3-page response to another student’s reflection paper
4. Integration Paper (about 10-12 pages)

A Level Work:

1. All of the requirements of the previous level
2. Integration Paper (about 20-25 pages)

All students must submit a final assignment (DUE Feb 4 at 11:59 PM) that brings together the work accomplished in this course. This final assignment will contain:

C Level Work:

1. Your original goal(s) assignment AND a 2-page reflection/assessment of your accomplishment of these goals
2. Your original Title and Footnotes assignment
3. Both of reflection papers

B Level Work

1. All the requirements of previous level
2. 10-12 page integration paper bringing together your reflection papers (with revision based on student and instructor feedback) and your groupwork

A Level Work

1. All of the requirements of the previous level
2. 20-25 page integration paper bringing together your reflection papers (with revision based on student and instructor feedback), your groupwork, and additional readings.

Please note: All the papers you submit for this course must meet substantive and formal requirements for a graduate level course in order to be accepted for a minimum A- or B-grade. If your integration paper is not submitted on February 4 or if it is unsatisfactory, you will receive a B level or C level grade depending on the work you have done.

<u>Assignment</u>	<u>Due Dates</u> (submit at start of class unless otherwise indicated)
Goal for the Course	Mon, Jan 14
Title and Footnotes	Wed, Jan 16
Reflection Paper(s)	date corresponding to assigned reading
Response to Refl. Paper	Wed, Jan 30 (by 11:59 PM via email to myself and student)
Response to Title and FN.	Wed, Jan 30 (by 11:59 PM via email to myself and student)
Integration Paper	Mon, Feb 4 (by 11:59 PM via email)

Course Schedule

Mon, Jan 14: Who are these people and what are these scriptures?

Tues, Jan 15: What Is Black biblical interpretation?

- Choose **one** of the following introductory readings:
 1. Michael Brown, "The Eclipse of a Eurocentric Enterprise" (1-23 in *Blackening of the Bible*)
 2. Mitzi J. Smith, "Introducing African American Interpretation" (1-22 in *Insights from African American Interpretation*)
 3. Renita J. Weems, "Reading *Her Way* through the Struggle" (57-80 in *Stony the Road We Trod*)
 4. Vincent Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans" (81-97 in *Stony the Road We Trod*)

Wed, Jan 16: Early Voices

- Choose **one** of the following introductory readings:
 5. Dwight Callahan, "The Poison Book" (21-40 in *The Talking Book*)
 6. Nyasha Junior, "Womanist Biblical Interpretation: Forerunners" (39-56 in *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*)
 7. Roy Kay, "Psalm 68:31 and the Fight for Freedom and Equality in Antebellum America" (111-136 in *The Ethiopian Prophecy in Black American Letters*)
 8. Albert Raboteau, "Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Out Her Hands" (397-413 in *Af Am Rel Thought Anthology*)
 9. Jeremy Schipper, "On Such Texts Comment Is Unnecessary" (1-18 in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*)

Thur, Jan 17: Modern Scholarship

- Everyone, Read:
 10. Mitzi J. Smith, "Twentieth Century Foundations" and "African American Biblical Interpretation in the Early Twenty-first Century" (23-76 in *Insights from African American Interpretation*)
- AND choose ONE of the following readings from *The Africana Bible*

11. Rodney Sadler, "Genesis" (70-79 in *The Africana Bible*)
12. Judy Fentress-Williams, "Exodus" (80-88 in *The Africana Bible*)
13. Madeline McClenney-Sadler, "Leviticus" (89-93 in *The Africana Bible*)
14. Michelle Ellis Taylor, "Numbers" (94-99 in *The Africana Bible*)
15. Randall C. Bailey, "Judges" (120-122 in *The Africana Bible*)
16. Dexter E. Callender, Jr., "Ezekiel" (157-163 in *The Africana Bible*)
17. Wallace Hartsfield, "Hosea" (164-168 in *The Africana Bible*)

Fri, Jan 18: Womanist Interpretation

- Choose one of the following introductory readings:
 18. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, "Introduction" (1-20 in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible*)
 19. Nyasha Junior, "Womanist Biblical Interpretation" and "Conclusion" (95-132 in *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*)
 20. Mitzi J. Smith, "This Little Light of Mine" (109-127 in *I Found God in Me*)
 21. Renita J. Weems, "Re-Reading for Liberation" (42-55 in *I Found God in Me*)
- AND choose one of the following readings AND the biblical text:
 22. Stacy Davis, "The Invisible Women" (21-48 in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible*)
 - Numbers 30:1-16
 23. Wilda C. Gafney, "Genesis" (Excerpt) (15-29 in *Womanist Midrash*)
 - Genesis 1:1-3:24
 24. Wilda C. Gafney, "A Womanist Midrash of Delilah" (49-72 in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible*)
 - Judges 16:1-31
 25. Vanessa Lovelace, "'We Don't Give Birth to Thugs'" (239-264 in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible*)
 - Judges 11:1-40
 26. Mitzi J. Smith, "Dis-membering, Sexual Violence, and Confinement" (99-122 in *Insights from African American Interpretation*)
 - Judges 19:1-30
 27. Kimberly Dawn Russaw, "Wisdom in the Garden" (223-235 in *I Found God in Me*)
 - Genesis 2:4-3:24
 28. Renita J. Weems, "A Mistress, A Maid, and No Mercy" (1-19 [questions on 21-24] in *Just A Sister Away*)
 - Genesis 16:1-16 and 21:1-21

Sun, Jan 20

- Students are strongly encouraged to attend a Black Church for Martin Luther King Day celebration

Mon, Jan 21

- No class, celebrate King Day

Tues, Jan 22: Prophetic Preaching

- Read **each** of the following:

29. Geneva Cannon, "Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church" (56-67 in *I Found God in Me*)
30. Debra J. Mumford, "Jeremiah Wright and Black Prophetic Preaching" (2008 publication from www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com)
31. Jeremiah Wright, "The Day of Jerusalem's Fall" (September 16, 2001).
32. Jeremiah Wright, "God and Government" (April 13, 2003)
33. Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union" (March 18, 2008)
34. Michael Powell, "A Theology Under Fire" (May 4, 2008)

Wed, Jan 23: The Arts

- Read
 35. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Focus on chapters 2, 6, 16, and 18.

Thur, Jan 24: Heterosexism

- Skim the introductory material by Gomes:
 36. Peter J. Gomes, "What's It All About" (3-24 in *The Good Book*)
 37. Peter J. Gomes, "A Matter of Interpretation" (25-52 in *The Good Book*)
- Closely read the following chapter:
 38. Peter J. Gomes, "The Bible and Homosexuality" (144-174 in *The Good Book*)

Fri, Jan 25: Unpacking after our journey

- No new readings; work on group presentations

Mon, Jan 28: Final Presentations

Course Policies

Inclusive and Expansive Language

Whether you are aware of this fact or not, Louisville Seminary emphasizes the use of inclusive and expansive language with regards to people in our written and oral communications. This intentionality of language should be representative of the span of humanity with respect to gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, as well as physical and intellectual capacities. With gender, for example, “humankind” is an inclusive alternative to the androcentric term “mankind.” For many of us, this type of writing, speaking, and thinking may be new or different and we encourage you to continue to work with it as one aspect of proclaiming the truth of the gospel for all people.

In this course, we will also discuss God with this intentionality of language in mind. While it is clear that the Bible often uses masculine forms to refer to God, the Christian faith has always taught that God is beyond male and female. In keeping with the Christian conviction that God is neither male nor female and the attempt to remain intentional with our language, you are encouraged to either avoid gendered pronouns when referring to God or use pronouns that intentionally reflect the metaphors, theology, or claims you are making. Part of this expectation is that members of this community will be intentional with what we say rather than complicit in perpetuating biases (especially those we do not agree with) based upon our ignorance or lack of effort. To help us remain intentional with our language, the instructor may encourage students, on occasion, to remain cognizant of the language that we use.

Direct quotations and translations from the biblical text need not be altered to conform with this policy; but, you may alter these as well if you so choose.

Attendance

Prompt attendance is mandatory. Excessive tardiness (in time or frequency) constitutes an absence. Two unexcused absences negate your grading contract. If absences become a problem, students must meet with the instructor regarding the possibility of passing this class.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to submit their own work—or their own group's work in the cases where we have group assignments. The use of any ideas or words from an outside source must be acknowledged by an appropriate citation of the author and source. Failure to follow these guidelines constitutes plagiarism and may result in failure of this course. Two occurrences of plagiarism may result in dismissal from the seminary. Students unfamiliar with issues related to academic honesty can find help from the staff at the Academic Support Center. For more information, see the Policy for Academic Honesty in the Student Handbook.

Special Accommodations

Students requiring accommodations for a documented physical or learning disability should be in contact with the Director of the Academic Support Center and should speak with the instructor as soon as possible to arrange appropriate adjustments. Students with environmental or other sensitivities that may affect their learning are also encouraged to speak with the instructor.

Policy on Late Work

All assignments must be turned in on time. Students may be offered grace with regards to one late assignment during the course of the term. This grace does not apply to the final integration paper, which must be turned in by February 4 at 11:59 pm.