

[This is the syllabus from the last time the course ran; the new syllabus will be similar but may be updated in various ways – Prof Linafelt.]

**THE BOOK OF JOB:  
POETRY AND THEOLOGY IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING**  
Liberal Studies

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*“Tomorrow, if all literature was to be destroyed and it was  
left to me to retain one work only, I should save Job.”*

– Victor Hugo

*“. . . the greatest poem, whether of ancient or modern literature.”*

– Alfred, Lord Tennyson

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

It has become increasingly clear that the Biblical book of Job is a towering classic of the human literary and theological imagination. Few books of the Bible are as challenging as Job, and few offer rewards as great for sustained engagement, reflection, and discussion. As a poetic achievement, it is the highwater mark of ancient Hebrew verse; as a theological document, it is unmatched for its honesty about the problems raised by human suffering for any account of God’s workings in the world. In our close reading and study of the book of Job we will attend to the literary dimensions of the book as a way to discover its theological resources. Questions to be addressed include: What is the appropriate motivation for piety? Can or should suffering have meaning? If so, who gives it meaning? What is the proper response to suffering, especially in a religious context? How do we know what we claim to know as truth? What is the nature of God? What is the place of justice in the world? What is the nature of the cosmos: orderly, chaotic, or a mixture of both?

### TEXTBOOKS

Any good Bible, New Revised Standard Version or The Tanakh suggested.  
Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job*.  
Archibald MacLeish, *J.B.*  
Other readings will be on reserve.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

(1) Preparation, Attendance, and Participation: This will make or break the class. Every member of the class will be treated as a colleague with something to offer, so be sure to come to class regularly and on-time, and be prepared to discuss the readings for the week. (If you are sick and can't make it call or email me before class to let me know.)

As part of your preparation for each class meeting, you are expected to spend about six hours with the readings – underlining, taking notes, pondering larger implications, and completing any written assignments that might be due. As you read and think about the biblical passages keep in mind three basic questions, on which I will elaborate further in class: (1) *What* does the passage say and *how* does it say it? (2) *Why* does it say this and not something else? and

(3) What are the *ethical* and *theological* implications of the passage; in other words, what would happen if one took this passage seriously as a resource for relating to others and for thinking about God? Or to put it more broadly, *Is there something true* here, and what would happen if you took this text seriously, if it became part of your map for negotiating life or part of society's map for negotiating our collective life?

(2) Three Short Papers: Due dates are marked below. Approximately three pages on an assigned question, these papers should present a clear thesis and support it with evidence from the passages under consideration.

(3) One Term Paper: Due on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, this paper of approximately ten pages could be either an exegetical study (an interpretation based on your own close analysis of a short biblical passage) or it could be a more thematic or topical study (which should nevertheless show evidence of a close engagement with the biblical text). We will talk more about both possibilities in the coming weeks.

(4) Critical Report: Due Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>, you will write a medium-length paper (seven pages or so) in which you critically evaluate three different approaches to interpreting and understanding the God-speeches in chapters 38 – 41. I will give you a handout that has more detailed instructions about the assignment and a list of possible readings.

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## COURSE SCHEDULE

- Sept 13            *Introduction to the course and to the book of Job.*
- 20                *Reader's Theater.*  
Bring Mitchell to class for reading aloud.  
Read before class:  
Carol Newsom, "Job as Polyphonic text" (handout).  
Mitchell's Introduction and translation of Job.
- 27                *Prologue and Epilogue, and an introduction to biblical narrative.*  
Read before class:  
Job, chapters 1 and 2 (close analysis);  
J. P. Fokkelman, "Preliminary Exercise: A Very Short Story"  
(on reserve);  
\* \* \* \* Short paper #1 due \* \* \* \*
- Oct 4             *Job's curse, and an introduction to biblical poetry.*  
Read before class:  
Job, chapter 3 (close analysis; compare with Genesis 1, Jeremiah 20:14  
and Jeremiah 4:23-28);  
Robert Alter, "The Medium of Poetry" (on reserve).
- 11                *No Class Meeting – Columbus Day*  
[Use the extra time to get started on your term paper.]
- 18                *First and second cycle of speeches.*  
Read before class:  
Job, chapters 4 – 21;  
Job 7:17-19 (close analysis; compare with Psalm 8).  
\* \* \* \* Short paper #2 due \* \* \* \*
- 25                *Third cycle, Job's soliloquy, Elihu's speeches.*  
Read before class:  
Job, chapters 22 – 37;  
Job, chapter 28 (close analysis);  
Gustavo Gutierrez, "God and the Poor" (on reserve).
- Nov 1            *The God-speeches.*  
Read before class:  
Job 38:1 – 42:6 (close analysis);  
Rudolph Otto, "The Ways of God are a Mystery" (on reserve).  
\* \* \* \* Short paper #3 due \* \* \* \*
- 8                 *The God-speeches (cont.), Job's responses, and the epilogue.*  
Read before class:

- Job 38:1 – 42:17 (close analysis);  
Erazim Kohak, “The Gift of the Night” (on reserve).
- 15            *The Book of Job as Tragedy and Anti-Tragedy*  
Read before class:  
Paul Ricoeur, “The Reaffirmation of the Tragic”;  
Harold Fisch, “Job: Tragedy is not Enough” (both on reserve).
- 22            No Class – Society of Biblical Literature Meeting  
\* \* \* \* Term paper due \* \* \* \*  
[Though we will not meet as a class, turn your papers  
in at my office.]
- 29            *The Book of Job as Theology and Anti-Theology*  
Read before class:  
Wendy Farley, “A Phenomenology of Divine Love”;  
Murray Haar, “Job after Auschwitz” (both on reserve).
- Dec     6            *The Book of Job in the Modern World.*  
Read before class:  
Archibald MacLeish, *J. B.*  
Watch before class [optional]:  
*The Wizard of Oz.*

**Academic Standards:** MALS and DLS students are responsible for upholding the Georgetown University Honor System and adhering to the academic standards included in the Honor Code Pledge stated below:

*In the pursuit of the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life, I commit myself to respect and uphold the Georgetown University Honor System: To be honest in any academic endeavor; and to conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community, as we live and work together.*

**Disability Notice:** If you believe you have a disability, you should contact the Academic Resource Center—Suite 335, Leavey Center ([arc@georgetown.edu](mailto:arc@georgetown.edu)) –for further information. This office is responsible for reviewing documentation provided by students with disabilities and for determining reasonable accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and University policies.