

Rel. 675
Carolyn J. Sharp

Spring 2005
M, W 1:30 - 2:50 p.m.

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Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible: The Power of the Unspoken in Sacred Texts

This course will explore literary, theological, and hermeneutical issues involved in interpreting Hebrew Bible texts that present characters, plot, or rhetoric in one way or another as ironic. We will consider particularly the rich and varied ways in which irony functions in Old Testament stories to subvert or deconstruct socio-political boundaries that ostensibly secure Israel's identity against outsiders. Attention will be paid to the testing and refinement of an interpretive method that can map both textual clues and reader agency in the apprehension of the power of the unspoken in ironic texts. We will take special care to consider ironies of voicing, character, plot, and intertextual traditioning processes.

Objectives of the course are:

- to deepen students' appreciation of the literary artistry and rhetorical complexity of Biblical texts employing irony in their theological and political constructions of identity and meaning;
- to strengthen students' grasp of the interpretive challenges involved in reading, teaching, and preaching ironic Scripture texts;
- to foster students' development of increasingly sophisticated exegetical skills through attentive reading of Biblical passages, critical engagement of literary, theological, and hermeneutical issues raised by the material, and thoughtful assessment of relevant secondary literature.

Evaluative Measures

Each student's course grade will be determined according to the following evaluative measures:

- 1) A creative written study (6 to 8 pages) that explores how irony functions in the persona of an Old Testament character or in the plot in which the character appears, and then suggests ways in which the character could be used as a model or foil for contemporary preaching, liturgy, teaching, social justice ministry,

or other practical application (due at class time on **Wednesday, March 23**; 30% of grade). For example, your paper might address a question such as:

- > *Is the figure of Jonah a helpful model or foil for the preaching task?*
- > *Does the story of Tamar provide grist for analysis of family systems?*
- > *Could Joseph ever become a successful Yale Divinity School professor?*
- > *Would Amos be disastrous in a supervised ministry placement?*

2) A term paper (10 to 12 pages) treating an interpretive issue in an Old Testament text in which irony plays a role (due **Thursday, May 5**; 55% of the grade). Your paper should include an explicit treatment of the question of how one discerns irony and defends its presence (or the persuasiveness of its postulation) to a skeptic. The paper must engage critically at least two scholarly treatments of the issue: one by a scholar who reads the text "straight" or who does not draw appreciably on notions of irony or the unreliability of the text, and another by a scholar who is interested in irony or some sort of deconstructive approach to the text. "Engage critically" here means to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of these authors' positions *in significant detail* and to reflect on how the authors' arguments have or have not proved useful in the construction of your own argument.

3) Regular class participation (15% of grade), which includes conscientious preparation of Biblical and secondary reading, engagement in class discussions, occasional leadership of our discussion of secondary reading, and a short presentation of your term paper topic to the class.

Attendance policy: Each student may have two absences from class with no resulting consequences. If you are absent on a day on which you were scheduled to lead discussion, that will count as two absences. You need not tell me the reason for your absence; I trust that adult learners balance responsibly their academic obligations, health concerns, and other life priorities. Any absences beyond two will result in your class participation grade being lowered significantly. Chronic lateness may eventually be counted as an absence, at my discretion. This policy is simply a pragmatic reflection of the fact that your absence affects the learning and ethos of the entire group. Your presence and commitment to our common learning are valuable!

I will be pleased to provide written comments on drafts of papers that are given to me by class time on Wednesday, April 6. Considering feedback about a paper's strengths and weaknesses may enable you to improve logic and argumentation, refine written expression, and otherwise strengthen your paper before it receives a grade.

There is no grade penalty of any kind for late work, but any written work turned in after the specified due date will receive no feedback from me other than its grade.

All written work submitted by you must be your own. If you cite, paraphrase, or in any other way rely on ideas, distinctive phrases, or argumentation from a written source,

that source must be properly acknowledged. For more information, consult the appendix on plagiarism at the end of this syllabus.

Papers are to be typewritten in a 12-point font, double-spaced, paginated, with margins between 1" and 1 1/4" on all sides. If the paper has notes, they should be footnotes (i.e., located at the bottom of the relevant page) rather than endnotes. Block quotations and footnotes should be single-spaced. A separate bibliography is not necessary if full initial citations of works are provided in the notes. If you are unsure as to proper footnote style, consult *The SBL Handbook of Style* (Hendrickson, 1999), available in the Divinity Library, or another accepted authority such as *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

Required Books

The below books will be used heavily in this class. Additional required readings are available in a photocopied course packet that may be purchased at TYCO, located at 262 Elm Street downtown. The books and TYCO packet will be on Reserve in the Divinity Library, should you prefer to consult them there rather than purchase them.

Adam, A. K. M. *What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995.

Booth, Wayne C. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Colebrook, Claire. *Irony (The New Critical Idiom)*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

----- Schedule of Class Sessions and Readings -----

Readings are to be completed before the meeting of the class session under which they are listed. Bring a Bible and all relevant required readings to each class session.

When leading our discussion on secondary reading, please have a handout for the class that outlines your main points and questions. Note that a lengthy description of content will be unnecessary since all will have read the text. After a succinct and thoughtful summary of the article's main points, you should move immediately to engage the following or similar questions with classmates:

- * What are the strengths of the arguments made in the material you are presenting? What is compelling or imaginative or original?
- * On which points is the argument weakest, methodologically or conceptually? What questions remain unanswered for you after you've read the material?