## RELS LogoWhy God Lies: The Difficult Deity of the Hebrew Bible

***RELS 3114-001/Macy 205/2:30-3:45***

***Instructor: Dr. Barbara Thiede***

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***Office Hours: Tu/Thu 1-2:15 and by appointment***

**Course Description:** Is the deity omniscient and omnipotent? Or does God fumble, bumble, and mumble? In this course, we will explore challenging passages of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible in which the deity appears to fib, connive, or outright lie to patriarchs, prophets, and Israelite people. We'll work to understand the bible's cultural and historical context and consider how the character of God is "read." -*Textual or Historical Analysis*.

**Required Text:** *The Jewish Study Bible,* second edition (Oxford UP: 2014) ISBN-10: 0199978468 / ISBN-13: 978-0199978465.

**Recommended Text:** *The Bible: Sources Revealed****,*** Richard Elliot Friedman ISBN: 9780060730659

All other resources are on our Canvas site and are due the day they are listed**. But you must purchase your own copy of *The Jewish Study Bible*.** We need to be on the same page using the same text and the same commentaries. You will be expected to read the commentary, which is unique to this translation, so other translations cannot substitute.

***Course Goals for Students:***

* *Mastery of basic terminology for analyzing the Hebrew Bible*
* *Analyzing biblical texts academically.*
* *Evaluating academic and scholarly texts respectfully and critically.*
* *Developing convincing and innovative arguments based on source materials.*

***Course Goals for Instructor:***

* *Create a range of assignments, including low-stakes assignments that help students situate themselves as they work on developing analytical and writing skills.*
* *Offer feedback to help students understand how to succeed.*
* *Make clear that the class is an open forum for a variety of views (students should never feel they have to agree with me!).*
* *Acknowledge and recognize power differentials.*
* *Send the signal that I am here to help.*

***Attendance Policies:*** Policies below are from the *UNCC Faculty Handbook* and the UNC-system handbook (so, yes, expect some bureaucratic language which nevertheless is important to read and digest.

1. Students are expected to attend **punctually** **all** scheduled sessions in the courses for which they are registered and are responsible for completing the work from all class sessions.
2. Students who miss class are responsible for the work missed.
3. Instructors are not required to give make-up tests except in the case of religious observance (see below).
4. You must be **on time** to be counted as present. If you join the session late, *you may be marked absent for that day*.
5. Students **may not** miss more than one class without affecting their grade.

***Absence Policy:***

* **1-2 absences**: Students miss the benefit of any class announcements about changes or expectations, critical lecture material, and class discussion. **It is the student’s responsibility** to acquire notes and information from other students.
* **3 absences:** Missing three classes is the equivalent of missing one and a half weeks of class. Three absences can result in a ½ letter grade deduction (5 pts) from the final grade for the course.
* **4 absences:**  1 letter grade can be deducted from the final grade for the course.
* **5 and more:** student can receive an automatic “F” for the course.

**Plan for emergencies. Assume that you are likely to *have* *to miss class for some unforeseen reason.* You have two class sessions to do exactly that without troubling your grade.**

***Religious Observance:*** Students may take two absences for religious observance *per academic year*. Students must fill out the “Request for Accommodation for Religious Observance” form and turn it in prior to the census day (Sept. 1) to be granted such an absence. See (<http://legal.uncc.edu/policies/ps-134.html>) and (<http://legal.uncc.edu/sites/legal.uncc.edu/files/media/policies/ps-134-AccommodationForm.pdf>).

***Course Syllabus:*** The standards and requirements set forth in this syllabus may be modified at any time by the course instructor (yes, that is a privilege of power). Notice of such changes will be by announcement in class or by email notice. If you miss class, be sure to ask other students (not me) if there were important announcements you should note.

***Disability accommodation:*** Students in this course seeking accommodations to disabilities must first consult with the Office of Disability Services and follow the instructions of that office for obtaining accommodations.

***Preferred Gender Pronoun:*** This course affirms people of all gender expressions and gender identities. If you prefer to be called a different name than the one indicated on the class roster, please let me know. Feel free to correct me on your preferred gender pronoun. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

***Academic Integrity*** Students have the responsibility to know and observe the requirements of The UNC Charlotte Code of ***You should familiarize yourself with, and conform your conduct to, the University’s Code of Student Academic Integrity (legal.uncc.edu/policies/up-407). Plagiarism on any assignment will result, at a minimum, in a failing grade for the course.***

**AI policy:**

There are times when you might find that using AI truly does help you prepare for class or craft an assignment; we will take time to look at how well such systems work when it comes to learning about biblical literature. AI is a tool, and one that you need to acknowledge using. Please make sure, in any written assignment that includes working with this tool, a statement that explains what you used AI for. Include all prompts you used to get your results. Failure to do so is in violation of academic honesty policies.

***Grading:***

Class Participation 05 pts

Padlets 10 pts.

Hebrew Bible Exam 15 pts.

Quizzes/Burst Writing Assignments 15 pts

Three-point outline 1 10 pts.

Three-point outline 2 15 pts.

Final Project 30 pts.

***Grading Elements, described:***

* **Class participation:** Hopefully, y’all know what this means. It means healthy, knowledgeable, active involvement in class discussion and class activities. What am I looking for? Your ability to demonstrate that you’ve prepared for class by reading and thinking about the materials. And yes, if you miss classes, it does affect how many points you earn in this category.
* **Padlets:** If you have never done one of these, no worries – they are easy, low-stakes assignments and I will award points for participating largely on pass/fail grounds. Each Padlet is worth 2 points.
* **Practice quizzes** listed on the syllabus are ungraded. They are just meant to give you practice in the early part of the course when we have to learn a lot of basic data. BUT, if you get four out of five questions right on any quiz, you will get extra credit at the end of the semester (more on this in class).
* **Three-point outlines:** We will be learning how to do these and practicing the skill in class.
* **Final projects:** These include three parts. A thesis and three-point outline, two article analysis worksheets and review of your process, and a short, in-class essay.

**A note on process:** While I never assign group work for grades, I do use small groups for tackling material. Be prepared to work with anyone in your class with kindness, care, and respect during class sessions. Make sure to follow the rule: step forward, step back both in general discussion and group discussion.

The grading scale used in this course is as follows:

90 – 100 A = demonstrable mastery of material; can creatively synthesize

80 – 89 B = some demonstrable proficiency in control of material & analysis

70 – 79 C = satisfactory performance of assignments; little or no analysis

60 – 69 D = inadequate and/or faulty understanding of material

0 – 59 F = unacceptable work

***Course Expectations***

1. **On religious views:** Some of us profess a religion or claim a particular faith. Some of us don’t. Our classroom is not the location for discussions of personal religious views but rather a forum for thinking about biblical material critically and inventively, as scholars and academics. Think of your biblical texts as the Ancient Israelite version of Homer’s *Odyssey* and you’ll get the idea. Or to put it another way: Yhwh (otherwise often known as God) is a *character*.
2. **On keeping on top of developments:** Join class prepared. Check your email at least once every day.
3. **Literacy is important:** I’ll supply some resources to help with writing skills, but please be aware that if you have trouble with punctuating, writing complete sentences, developing a thesis statement, and the like, you should seek help! Check out programs and tutorials at the Writing Resources Center ([wrchelp@uncc.edu](mailto:wrchelp@uncc.edu)) and the University Center for Academic Excellence (2300 Colvard).
4. **Class discussion:** Before each class, make sure you have done the reading and thought about it so you can participate with clarity, honesty, and intelligence. Such things are highly valued by your instructor. Please remember that students come from many backgrounds and may have different opinions and please contribute to a respectful classroom environment. Follow the rule of *Step Forward, Step Back*. If you contribute to class discussion, wait a bit before contributing again to give your classmates a chance to offer their own ideas and analysis.
5. **Respect classmates:** Please address your fellow students by the name and gender pronoun they prefer. Do not give personal information or email addresses to outsiders who are not a part of this class. Class lists may not be used to advertise your particular affiliations, student groups, and the like. The Student Organization Handbook explicitly states that “Student organizations may not disclose or collect information in e-mails that they are privileged to access because of their position at the University.”
6. **Respect the instructor’s time:** Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert will hunt an antelope by running it to death, chasing after it until it literally collapses from heat exhaustion. Please let this amazing show of perseverance inspire you when *you* go hunting for information. For example, before you send an email asking for an exam time, what pages were assigned, or the like, please check course documents like the syllabus first. I answer necessary emails with enthusiasm. ☺
7. **We love having guests, and….** Guests may join us *only with the written permission of the instructor.*
8. **Respect yourself!** If you have any issues that might compromise your ability to perform well in this class, please inform the instructor **as soon as the issue is relevant**. Think of this class as a nice residential home. If you had a serious problem with the house, such as an infestation of Australian killer wombats, you would want to do something about it as soon as possible. You would not want to wait until the last moment, for instance, when the wombats have eaten all your gardenias, and are about to construct an ICBM to demolish your house for good. Similarly, you should inform the instructor of any issues early, when something can still be done. Please.

**Class schedule**

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| **Assigned readings are listed for the day they are due to be completed.** | | |
| **Module 1: Framing Concerns: On Figuring out the Bible** | | **What’s It All About?** |
| August 22 | **Introduction to the course**   * ***READ THIS SYLLABUS*** * *Active Reading* * *Article Analysis*   ***Anonymous Padlet*** | We will take a bit of time to go over the syllabus and get to know one another. |
| August 24 | **Using AI: The good, the bad, and the ugly** | We will explore the nature of research and take a close look at AI use. |
| August 29  **Practice Quiz** | **The past is ancient territory**   * Hamlet Summary * Shakespeare in the Bush * Shakespeare in the Bush Study Questions   **Padlet 1 – On Different Territory – Shakespeare in the Bush**  <https://padlet.com/barbarathiede/on-different-territory-shakespeare-in-the-bush-cvlh15ahcjc00m03> | How do we understand worlds that seem (!) wholly different than ours? What do we need to keep in mind when we claim we can understand the Bible? |
| August 31 | **Reading the text: What is textual history? Who writes, and why?**   * English Text collection * Biblical Text collection * Timeline   **Padlet 2 - Waddya Know (about the Hebrew Bible)**  https://padlet.com/barbarathiede/waddya-know-about-hebrew-bible-n1ijwmv8x1fnctgr | How would one create a through line over centuries of literary production? What about agendas, agency, and purpose? What can we discern about the text? What is the role of what we consider “history”? Consider doing a little AI research on your own as well to see what you can say about the Hebrew Bible. In class, we will look at some texts together…biblical and otherwise. |
| September 5  **Practice Quiz** | **Reading the text: What is the Hebrew Bible made of?**   * General Principles * Friedman Bible Legend * Friedman, “Collection of Evidence.” * Collection of Evidence Chart * YHVH – God’s Name in Hebrew Bible * Flood Stories by Color * J and P Flood Stories Separated | Doublets, terminology, etc. Why does any of this matter? |
| September 7 | **When did biblical interpretation begin?**   * James Kugel, “The World of Ancient Interpreters,” pp. 1-10 (to “Rise of the Interpreter”); see also Study Guide for Kugel, Timeline of Ancient Israelite History for study aids. * Study Guide for Kugel | Why is interpretation needed? In what ways does interpretation define identity? |
| September 12  **Practice Quiz** | **Who are the Bible’s interpreters and how do they (and we) interpret?**   * Kugel, “The World of Ancient Interpreters,” pp. 10-26 (to “The Heritage of Wisdom”). * Linafelt, Narrative and Poetic Art in the Book of Ruth,” pp. 117-123. | What kind of literature are we looking at? Why do words like “cryptic” or “harmonious” matter? |
| September 14 | **Language! Language!**   * How to Read Hebrew-Genesis 1:26 * Interpretation Through Punctuation * Hebrew – Consonantal Issues and Punning | Why does understanding *Hebrew* matter? And why should we (always) doubt our opinions? |
| September 19  **Practice Quiz** | **Test case: Jacob Wrestles With Whom?**   * *Jewish Study Bible,* Chapter 32. * Kugel, “Jacob Struggled with an Angel,” pp. 224-29. * Genesis 32 – Hebrew and English Text | A first stab at labbing a biblical text happens today! |
| September 21 | **Review Day!** | Obvious |
| September 26 | **On Hebrew Bible – in class exam** | Obvious… |
| **Module 2: Why God Lies, Part 1: Wisdom, Eternal Life and (Apparently) Divine Confusion** | | |
| September 28 | **The Creation Story: Waddya Know?**  **Padlet 3 - Waddya Know? Genesis 2:5-3**  <https://padlet.com/barbarathiede/whaddya-know-genesis-2-5-3-aw1m8weflfy0bwd9> | What can AI can tell us about categories of the second creation story? What can we (safely) conclude? |
| October 3 | **How NOT to read biblical Texts?**   * *Jewish Study Bible,* Genesis 2:5 – 3. * You take Lilith, I’ll Take Eve * Article Analysis | In this class, we learn how to analyze an essay and dissect its arguments about a biblical text. |
| October 5 | **Interrogating the text and finding an argument**   * *Jewish Study Bible,* Genesis 2:5 – 3. * The Making of Humankind – Jewish Legends * Enoch on the Tree of Wisdom * Avot d’Rabi Natan (the Serpent as Humankind’s Helper) * Rabbinic Midrash on the Serpent and the Garden of Eden. * Kugel - Selections on Genesis * Please review the text “What is a Thesis Statement” before class! | In this class, we will work on how to develop a line of argument about whether (or how) the Israelite deity lies in the second Genesis story.  We will also practice developing a line of argument about other characters, plot development, the narrative as a whole… |
| **Module 3: Why God Lies, Part 2: Fibbing, Prevaricating, Bullying, Threatening and What Else?** | | |
| October 10 | **The Binding of Isaac: Identifying problems and questions…**   * *Jewish Study Bible,* Genesis 22 * Rabbinic Midrash - The Binding of Isaac   **Padlet 4 - Waddya Know? Genesis 22 – Take 1**  <https://padlet.com/barbarathiede/genesis-22-take-1-iarja7cyikvhycfy> | Why is this story so troubling? This first day, we will explore Abraham’s reactions and behaviors. Does he tell the truth? |
| October 12 | **The Binding of Isaac: Identifying problems and questions…**   * *Jewish Study Bible,* Genesis 22   **Padlet 4 - Waddya Know? Genesis 22 – Take 2 continued**  <https://padlet.com/barbarathiede/genesis-22-take-1-iarja7cyikvhycfy> | Today we will explore the other characters in the narrative, including Isaac, the servants, the angel, and, of course, the deity. |
| October 17 | **Challenging the Conventions: Source History on Genesis 22**   * Boehm, “The Binding of Isaac: An Inner-Biblical Polemic…” pp. 1-13. * Questions for Consideration – Boehm   **Padlet 5 - Waddya Know? Genesis 22 – Take 2**  <https://padlet.com/barbarathiede/genesis-22-take-2-xaepsgzl7pdvgs4p> | What happens when all our expectations are turned upside down? How might we reread the text? |
| October 19 | **Developing an argument using the text!**   * *Jewish Study Bible,* Genesis 22 | In this class, we will practice developing a line of argument, a thesis, and three-point outlines about the nature of the deity. |
| October 26 | **Peer review** | You will be presenting your arguments and outline for peer review. |
| October 31 | **The deity talks (or doesn’t) to his patriarchs…**   * *Jewish Study Bible* Genesis 18 * Rabbinic Midrash on Genesis 18 – Sarah and Abraham beget a son   **Padlet 6 - Genesis 18: On Biblical Relationships**  https://padlet.com/barbarathiede/genesis-18-on-biblical-relationships-vattazixxhe77q1j | Two problems occur in this chapter – the deity fails to accurately report what Sarah says AND the he asks himself whether he should be honest with Abraham who mysteriously intuit the coming disaster. Wassup? |
| November 2 | **Divine claims, divine agendas**   * *Jewish Study Bible,* 1 Samuel 16 * *Jewish Study Bible,* Numbers 22 * *Jewish Study Bible,* 1 Kings 22 * *Jewish Study Bible*, Exodus 4   **Padlet 7 - The Deity’s Character – Four Biblical Texts**  <https://padlet.com/barbarathiede/the-deity-s-character-four-biblical-texts-vvdx4ogyuj7z994q> | Yhwh says one thing and does another, threatens the very messengers he chooses, and colludes with a lying spirit – why, and what does he gain? |
| November 7 | **Working the texts** | In this class, we will practice developing a line of argument, a thesis, and three-point outlines about the nature of the deity. |
| November 9 | **Topic: Lamentations**  *Assigned Reading:*   * O’Connor, “The Abusing God,” pp. 110-123. * Questions for Consideration – O’Connor   **Padlet 8 - Lamentations – O’Connor**  <https://padlet.com/barbarathiede/lamentations-o-connor-gvs3uxg7c0vrjgm0> | In this module we will work on how to read academic articles on biblical texts; prepare for some heavy-duty dissection to be going on! |
| November 14 | **Lamentations**   * *Jewish Study Bible*, Lamentations, Chapter 1-5 * Mintz, “The Rhetoric of Lamentations and the Representation of Catastrophe,” pp. 1-9. * Questions for Consideration-Mintz   **Padlet 9 - Lamentations – Mintz – Take 1**  <https://padlet.com/barbarathiede/lamentation-mintz-take-1-hnvwwai18w1p04d1> | We dissect (slowly) another, heavily academic piece on the Book of Lamentations. |
| November 16 | **Lamentations**   * Mintz, “The Rhetoric of Lamentations and the Representation of Catastrophe,” pp. 9-18. * Rabbinic Midrash – the Destruction of Jerusalem * Summary of Rachel Confronting God   **Padlet 10 - Lamentations – Mintz – Take 2**  <https://padlet.com/barbarathiede/lamentations-mintz-take-2-woskcmadrlst9kjg> | Part 2: Dissecting Mintz |
| November 21 | **Doing the Research**   * Your task is to find two academic articles on the topic of your choice. | Read them carefully! |
| November 28 | **Labbing your topic, part 1** | We will be taking this class to discuss the articles you read and construct your article analysis worksheets. |
| November 30 | **Labbing your topic, part 2** | We will be taking this class and the next to work on thesis statements and three-point outlines. |
| December 5 | **Class Summary** | Just what it says! |
| **Final Exam period: Tuesday, Dec. 12 2:00 - 4:30 pm** | | |