Course: Puzzling Passages in Scripture (YSS/YLSS/YMS9328 N/CG7328 N)
Term: Spring 2018
Day and Time: Tuesday, 7-9:45pm
Room: BN 204
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Office Hours: By Appointment

Course Description:

The Bible is the most important and the most difficult book in history. Its interpretation is made more challenging by passages that are found to be confusing or obscure. The so-called *crux interpretum* texts are the torment of the interpreter – they are difficult to interpret, explain, resolve or even pray. These are texts that are violent and appear to promote hatred and extreme violence. Scholars have labeled these scriptural passages “texts of terror.” The Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* 42 describes them as “dark passages.” Some are simply enigmatic. In the New Testament, some of these perplexing passages have been called “hard sayings.”

The course addresses some of these puzzling texts found in both the Old and the New Testaments. The course will survey and study only selected puzzling texts as a way to learn and demonstrate interpretive strategies in light of faith that help to illuminate such texts; it does not attempt a comprehensive study of all the confusing texts in the Bible.

The approach employed to study these perplexing texts is both literary and theological. The texts will be situated within their own ancient, historical, social, cultural and literary contexts. At the same time, they will be examined in light of the conviction that they form part of the inspired word of God that continues to speak to us today. Hence, after exploring what these texts may have meant in ancient times for their audience, an attempt to investigate and discern their hidden but enduring sense or what they may have to say to persons of faith today, especially in light of the teaching of Jesus, will be made.

Course Objectives:

The objective of the course is primarily to deepen and broaden our understanding of difficult scriptural passages. Hopefully, this will be achieved by considering various modern methods and
approaches to the study of difficult texts, by promoting a scholarly and theological discussion with one another, and by entering into conversation with other scholars who have attempted to make sense of these confusing, enigmatic, hard, challenging and difficult biblical passages.

Course Methodology, Requirements and Grading:

The course blends lecture and seminar-style class discussion where everyone has the opportunity to participate and contribute insights. Research has shown that learning is fostered by doing. To reinforce and consolidate the learning process from reading the biblical passages and assigned readings, students will write a paper, discuss, debate and participate in class discussions, which will normally take place during the second half of the class session.

Attendance and enthusiastic participation in the weekly class discussions constitute 30% of the final grade.

A 2 to 3 page book review of the instructor’s *When I Die, Bury Me Well* constitutes 20% of the final grade. The book is an attempt to explain the perplexing obsession with the practice of burying the dead in the deuterocanonical Book of Tobit. See guidelines below. This is due on March 8th.

A 6 to 7 page (10-12 pages in the MA/STB programs) exegetical or research paper on a difficult, confusing, puzzling or dark passage of Scripture that is not included in the syllabus constitutes 50% of the final grade. See guidelines below. This is due on May 3rd.

A student is of course expected to bring a copy of the Bible to class. The RSV, NRSV, NJB, NAB, NABRe are some of the recommended translations. Certainly, there is no substitute for a copy of the bible in the original languages of Greek and Hebrew.

Course Schedule:

The following class and reading schedule will be followed as much as possible. It is to be noted, however, that some circumstances might prevent us from strictly observing what is written below.

*Week 1*
Introduction; Syllabus, Discussion

*Week 2*
Is God male or female?
Gen 1:26-27 – “Let us make humans in our own image.”

Read:
Week 3
Is God capricious?
Gen 4 – The story of Cain and Abel

Read:

Week 4
Is God immoral?
Gen 22 – The Test of Abraham and the Binding of Isaac

Read:

Week 5
Is God cruel?
Exod 4:24-26 – “The Lord came upon Moses and would have killed him.”
The Book of Job

Read:

Week 6
Is God comprehensible?
Leviticus 10 – Nadab and Abihu

Read:

Week 7
Does God endorse genocide?
Deut 20:16-17; Josh 11:11 – The herem/ban and the problem of violence

Read:

Week 8
Why does God get angry?
Ezek 5:11-13/Amos 1:3–2:3 – “Terrible is the Wrath of the Lord”

Read:

Week 9
Did Jesus really mean that?

Read:

Week 10
Why Curse the Fig Tree?
Mark 11:12-25 – Jesus Gets Mad at a Tree
Read


Week 11
Why the hatred for dogs in the Bible?


Week 12
The End of the World: How to Make Sense of the perplexing images in the Book of Revelation.
The Book Revelation

Read:


Week 13
Review/Other Interests

Other Reminders:
Submitted papers are subject to graduate level standards. Correct grammar and coherent sentences are highly expected. In this regard, those for whom English is not the first language and those whose writing skills are lacking, editorial assistance is not only recommended but also extremely expected. Your paper has to have such quality that journals all over the world would clamor to publish it! You may wish to avail of the services provided by the University.

The student may wish to consider the following important questions when researching and writing his paper.

1. What makes this passage puzzling, challenging, obscure?
2. What are some of the interpretations of this passage (e.g., church fathers, art and literature, commentaries, recent scholarship)?
3. What literary, social, cultural, textual, historical and canonical factors help illumine the meaning of this passage for its original audience?
4. How can one make the original meaning of the passage relevant today? How can it speak to a person of faith living in today’s world?

Or,

1. Questions of Exegesis: What did the Bible originally mean to those who first wrote, heard, and read it? You will be able to explicate accurately many key passages from the Bible.
2. Questions of Application: How does this biblical text apply to your life and to our contemporary situation? You will be able to apply the ideas we find in the Bible to the many issues and controversies of our contemporary world.
3. Questions of Evaluation: Do these biblical ideas make sense? Are they true and sound?

When reviewing a book, the student needs to point out the thesis of the author and the arguments the author used in order to prove or show his or her thesis. In his critique, the student has to evaluate the arguments and analyze their validity and soundness. Finally, the student has to situate the book in its intellectual or academic environment and comment on how the book contributes to current scholarship on the topic covered by the book.

Finally, it is the sincere hope of the instructor that the faith of the student in Jesus Christ will broaden and deepen in addition to having fun learning about some of the most enigmatic passages in the Scriptures. The light of the revelation in Jesus Christ will hopefully illumine the darkness and the enigma of these passages.

**Selected Bibliography:**


