

**Biblical Interpretation**  
The Association of Partners in Christian Education  
January 22–24

**Instructor Contact**

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**Course Delivery Mode**

The course will be in-person. Prior to our first in-person meeting on January 22, we will need to meet virtually **for one hour on the week of November 27 to December 1** to review the syllabus, establish expectations, and plan for group prep-work. We will coordinate the best meeting time for all enrolled students.

**Course Description**

This course focuses on hermeneutics; in other words, our central concern will be on *how* we interpret the Bible. Our exploration will begin with overarching issues and ideas relevant to the discipline of hermeneutics including divine inspiration, biblical authority, the hermeneutical circle, methodologies, and more. Having grasped several issues, we will examine the ways that a handful of interpreters apply very different hermeneutics to Genesis 1–3 in order to arrive at very different understandings of its meaning. Throughout all of this work, our discussions and assignments will remain attuned to how a better familiarity with hermeneutics can assist a Presbyterian Educator’s understanding of varying interpretations of the Bible, as well as presentation of Reformed Tradition.

**Learning Goals**

Every reading, class discussion, and assignment is meant to help students with four different competencies in a historical, contemporary, Reformed, educational, and theological dimension of understanding scripture and its interpretation.

- Students will gain theoretical perspectives on how people understand these different dimensions
- Students will gain skills to apply these perspectives to different dimensions
- Students will practice showing a critical awareness of the impact of contexts on each perspective
- Students will turn this critical attention toward a self-critical awareness of their own strategies, social location, beliefs, and biases

**How Learning Happens**

I have structured this course to follow a democratic, 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 teaching/learning process is not based on a unilateral

sharing of packaged information, but rather on exercises designed to foster critical thinking, creative thinking, and collaboration. Our thought and study will be problem-oriented rather than positivistic and dogmatic; perspectival rather than relativistic; and geared toward contextual collaboration in the belief that engaging with our differences can enrich our thought and life.

## **Readings and Assignments**

Information on assignments and readings are organized into five sections below (assignments, readings on hermeneutics, biblical texts, secondary sources, and final assignments). Please see each of them.

There is one required book (Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics*) that you will need to purchase or rent on your own. In addition, each student will need access to the specific resources selected for their final assignment. You may be able to access such resources through your church or institution. All the other readings listed below will be available as PDFs.

If possible, I would prefer for you to complete the readings and assignments in the order listed below. For all three written assignments, I would like you to submit your work in single-space, size 12, Times New Roman. Please submit assignments 1, 2, and 3 on or before **January 5**. Your final reflection paper is due on **February 23**.

## **Assignments**

1. Lesson Plan Based on Jasper Reading
2. Presbyterian Documents on Scripture Assignments
  - a. PowerPoint Presentation Slides
  - b. Self-Assessment Questionnaire
3. Questions about Four Ancient Assumptions (Kugel)
4. Final Presentation
5. Final Reflection Paper

## Readings on Hermeneutics

Jasper, David. *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004.

- \*\*\* **Students must purchase this resource**
- Take good notes and earmark pages.
- We are going to spend a considerable amount of time discussing issues in interpretation that arise in this book.
- **Assignment:** What is one issue, theme, idea, concept, etc. in hermeneutics that captures your interest from Jasper's book? Create a lesson plan (relevant to your context as an educator) where you introduce this issue, theme, idea, or concept using one or more biblical texts. There are several ways in which you might want to go about this. For example, you could show how this issue, theme, idea, or concept has changed the way you interpret a particular text. You might introduce popular interpretations that require reconsideration in light of this issue, theme, idea, or concept. You might show the historical consequences of interpretations that have been informed by this issue, theme, idea, or concept. Or, you might have a completely different idea.

Brown, William P. "A Hermeneutical Adventure." Pages 3–10 in *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

- Take good notes.
- Be prepared to discuss in class and reference in your assignments Brown's careful explanation of exegesis, the concept of interpreting the Bible in three worlds, and the hermeneutical circle or spiral.

Gnuse, Robert K. "Inspiration of Scripture." Pages 2255–60 in *New Interpreter's Study Bible*. Edited by Walter Harrelson. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003.

Trible, Phyllis. "Authority of the Bible." Pages 2248–54 in *New Interpreter's Study Bible*. Edited by Walter Harrelson. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003.

- Take good notes in preparation for class discussion.
- Be prepared to discuss the ideas of biblical authority and divine inspiration in multiple contexts including, but not limited to, that of your upbringing, your current religious community, and your vocation.

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. "The Power of Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire." Pages 35–68 in *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.

- Take good notes in preparation for class discussion.
- Warning: This reading is very critical of religious and political conservatism.
  - If you feel that your own beliefs are the target of the author's critique, please try to be receptive to the content and method of the arguments in spite of your potential disagreement.
  - If you feel automatically predisposed to agree with her arguments because of your political and/or religious affiliations, please try to pay close attention to the content and method of her arguments rather than unwittingly ascribing to them.
- Be prepared to discuss the ways in which our context presents a challenge for defining biblical authority and divine inspiration. How does the idea of authority make a

difference in each of the three “worlds?” In what ways does that influence your definition of responsible exegesis?

Fentress-Williams, Judy, Luke Bobo, Renita Weems, and Carl Ellis. “Authority of Scripture: Why Is Scripture Authoritative?” 2018. <https://www.courageousconvos.org/authority/>.

- Watch the interview of the above scholars and take notes.
- Be prepared to discuss the questions of divine inspiration and authority of the Bible based upon the positions of these scholars in dialogue with the articles by Robert Gnuse and Phyllis Trible.

*Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture and Biblical Authority and Interpretation*. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1999 [1983].

[https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/resolutions/scripture-use.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/resolutions/scripture-use.pdf)

- Take good notes in preparation for class discussion.
- You must **complete both** of the following assignments. Assignment A will focus on *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture* and Assignment B will focus on *Biblical Authority and Interpretation*.
- **Assignment A:** How do each of “the three worlds” (from the Brown reading) play a role in the Reformed tradition’s understanding and use of Scripture as “the rule of faith”? Create a PowerPoint Presentation that you could use to introduce these “three worlds” and how they relate to Reformed interpretation of Scripture as “the rule of faith.”
- **Assignment B:** Which of the three “Models” (A, B, or C) do you find most convincing in your understanding of the Bible? Create a questionnaire **with ten or more questions** that can help people interrogate the role that their own social location, upbringing, convictions, culture, etc. plays a role in their understanding of the Bible. Answer your own questionnaire.

Smith, Mitzi J. “Introduction.” Pages 1–21 in *Insights from African American Interpretation. Reading the Bible in the 21st Century*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017.

- Take good notes in preparation for class discussion.
- Pay special attention to the distinctive characteristics of African American hermeneutics and the role that history and context play in shaping the traditions of African American interpretation.

## **Biblical Texts**

### Genesis 1–3

- Take notes as you read these verses including questions that arise
- These three chapters of Genesis present narratives that most of us are very familiar with. We have heard sermons, read interpretations, and experienced proof texting that draws upon parts or the whole of these chapters in various contexts. By looking back at these scriptures again while intentionally foregrounding the discipline of hermeneutics, we will explore the construction of meaning by interpreters of these texts.
- Our class discussions will come back to these verses again and again while considering various other ancient texts (within and outside of the Bible) and methods for interpretation.

### **Secondary Sources on Gen 1 – 3**

Kugel, James L. *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now*. New York: Free Press, 2007.

- Chapter 1 and 2 (pp. 1–57)
- Footnotes located on pp. 693–702
- Please read and take notes with the intent of scrutinizing the discipline of historical criticism. Consider how historical criticism can be a helpful corrective in contexts in which the Bible is understood as scripture. How can historical criticism be a pitfall in the same contexts? What critiques might you apply to the methods of historical criticism based on the readings from Brown, Jasper, and Fiorenza as well as the comments from Fentress-Williams and Weems.
- **Assignment:** How are Kugel’s four ancient assumptions about the Bible alive today? Find an example (online, in print, or in some other media) of a modern biblical interpretation that seems to follow one or more of the ancient assumptions that Kugel mentions in the reading. Create a list of three questions that interrogate the ancient assumption and its use in this interpretation. You might question its logic, utility, consequences, relationship to experiential contexts, or something else. In addition to formulating three questions, provide your own answers.

Meyers, Carol. *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

- Introduction (pp. 1–16), Chapter 4 (pp. 59–80), and Chapter 5 (pp. 81–102)
- Footnotes located on pp. 213–214 and 218–222
- Take thorough notes.
- Be prepared to discuss what it means for Meyers to focus on the world behind the text. What questions, predispositions, priorities, and methods guide her investigation of the world behind the text? How does the world behind the text influence her engagement with the world within the text? In what ways does her treatment of the Bible benefit communities of faith? How might you build upon her work in your particular context?

Yee, Gale A. *Poor Banished Children of Eve*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

- Chapter 4 (pp. 59–79)
- Footnotes located on pp. 183–191
- Take notes.
- Be prepared to discuss how Yee’s treatment of the world behind the text is different from Meyers. What questions does Yee ask of the text? How do the “worlds” of meaning interact in Yee’s interpretation? In what ways does Yee’s approach fit with and/or differ from Fiorenza’s treatment of an approach to the authority of the Bible? If you apply Yee’s approach in your context of ministry, how would you define divine inspiration?

Gafney, Wilda C. *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

- Introduction (pp. 1–11), Selection from Chapter 1 (pp. 15–28), Special Section on Women (pp. 72–85)
- Take notes.

- Be prepared to discuss the main principles that make up womanist interpretation for Gafney. How do these principles align with and/or differ from your own goals, methods, and convictions with interpretation? What is helpful, liberating, and/or attractive about her way of reading and interpreting? What do you find difficult, unattractive, and/or dangerous about her method?



## **Final Assignment**

The final assignment for this class consists of two parts. The first part is a presentation. The second part is a reflection paper.

Students must select one of the options listed below. Students will be grouped with others who select the same option.

### Presbyterian Women Bible Study Series

Aymer, Margaret P. *Confessing the Beatitudes*. Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Women, 2011.

### Children's Books by the Same Author

Levine, Amy-Jill, and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso. *A Very Big Problem*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2020.

———. *Who Counts? 100 Sheep, 10 Coins, and 2 Sons*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017.

———. *Who Is My Neighbor?* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2019.

### The Bible Project

Mackie, Tim. "How To Read the Bible Series." *Bible Project*, n.d.

[bibleproject.com/explore/how-to-read-the-bible](https://bibleproject.com/explore/how-to-read-the-bible).

### For Today Bible Study Series

Sharp, Carolyn J. *Old Testament Prophets for Today*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

### Follow Me Bible Study Series

Toole, Slats, and Justin Michael Reed. *Honor God's Diversity: Adult Reflection Guide*. Louisville, KY: Growing Faith Resources, 2022.

### Interpretation Bible Studies Series

Tull, Patricia K. *Esther and Ruth*. Interpretation Bible Studies. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003.

**Presentation:** On the last day of class, students will present a 30-minute presentation (in groups) that demonstrates their ability to analyze the hermeneutics involved in the resource that they have selected. Before our first day of class students should have already thoroughly reviewed the resource and begun to coordinate how to discuss, critique, and contextualize the hermeneutic embedded in it. During our time together, students should refine their planned presentation with our clarification of ideas and new issues that arise in discussion. The following questions help students uncover the hermeneutic that guides interpretation in their resource. In their presentation, students should address each of the questions and demonstrate evidence for their answers by showing interpretations of specific biblical texts when appropriate.

In my resource:

- What is the Bible?

- How, if at all, is the authority of the Bible understood or conveyed?
- Is the Bible divinely inspired? What does that mean?
- What role does each of the “three worlds” play in the interpretations produced?
- What is the method (procedure, methodology, genre) of interpretation?
- What are the most pressing questions that are asked or answered?
- What explicit presumptions guide interpretation?
- What implicit presumptions do you see?
- What values or ethics seem most central to this interpretation?
- What is the rubric by which one can distinguish a good interpretation from a bad interpretation?

**Reflection:** After the course is completed, students will submit a **five-page reflection paper** by **February 23**. This reflection paper turns hermeneutics more introspective. In dialogue with the sources we have discussed including in final presentations, each student must explain their own strategies for interpretation, their relationship to distinctive themes and interpretive principles in the Reformed tradition, and how this all fits into their theological understanding of the Bible as a whole.

## Course Schedule

Time	Monday (half-day) Jan 22	Tuesday (full-day) Jan 23	Wednesday (half-day) Jan 24
9:30–9:40		Prayer / Check in	Prayer / Check in
9:40–10:30		Divine Inspiration and Biblical Authority [Trible, and Gnuse]	Student Presentations
10:30–10:40		Break	Break
10:40–11:30		Considering Biblical Authority in Contexts [Courageous Conversations and Schüssler Fiorenza]	Student Presentations
11:30–11:40		Break	Break
11:40–12:30		Presbyterian Understanding of Scripture <i>[Presbyterian Understanding]</i>	Student Presentations
12:30–1:20	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
1:20–1:30	Prayer/Check in		
1:30–2:20	Interpretation of the Bible in Three Worlds [Jasper, Brown, and Kugel]	Presbyterian Understanding of Scripture Continued	
2:20–2:30	Break	Break	
2:30–3:20	The Hermeneutical Circle [Brown]  The Complexity of Hermeneutics (Part 1)	Compare and Contrast Hermeneutics Embedded in Kugel and Meyers	

3:20–3:30	Break		
3:30–4:20	The Complexity of Hermeneutics (Part 2)	Compare and Contrast Hermeneutics Embedded in Meyers and Yee	
4:20–4:30	Break		
4:30–5:20	Map Making as a Heuristic for Interpretation  Groupwork for Presentations	Contextualize Gafney within African American Hermeneutics  Groupwork for Presentations	

## **Bibliography**

- Brown, William P. "A Hermeneutical Adventure." Pages 3–10 in *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.
- Fentress-Williams, Judy, Luke Bobo, Renita Weems, and Carl Ellis. "Authority of Scripture: Why Is Scripture Authoritative?," 2018. <https://www.courageousconvos.org/authority/>.
- Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. "The Power of Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire." Pages 35–68 in *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.
- Gafney, Wilda C. "Introduction" and excerpts from "Genesis." Pages 1–28, 72–85 in *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.
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- Kugel, James L. Chapters 1 and 2. Pages 1–57 and 693–702 in *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now*. New York: Free Press, 2007.
- Meyers, Carol. Introduction, Chapters 4–5. Pages 1 – 16, 59–102, and 213–222 in *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
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- Smith, Mitzi J. "Introduction." Pages 1–21 in *Insights from African American Interpretation. Reading the Bible in the 21st Century*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017.
- Trible, Phyllis. "Authority of the Bible." Pages 2248–54 in *New Interpreter's Study Bible*. Edited by Walter Harrelson. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003.
- Yee, Gale A. Chapter 4. Pages 59–79 and 183–191 in *Poor Banished Children of Eve*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

## **Options for Final Presentation:**

- Aymer, Margaret P. *Confessing the Beatitudes*. Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Women, 2011.
- Levine, Amy-Jill, and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso. *A Very Big Problem*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2020.
- . *Who Counts? 100 Sheep, 10 Coins, and 2 Sons*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017.
- . *Who Is My Neighbor?* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2019.
- Mackie, Tim. "How To Read the Bible Series." *Bible Project*, n.d. [bibleproject.com/explore/how-to-read-the-bible](http://bibleproject.com/explore/how-to-read-the-bible).
- Sharp, Carolyn J. *Old Testament Prophets for Today*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009.
- Toole, Slats, and Justin Michael Reed. *Honor God's Diversity: Adult Reflection Guide*. Louisville, KY: Growing Faith Resources, 2022.
- Tull, Patricia K. *Esther and Ruth*. Interpretation Bible Studies. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003.