

**THE BOOK OF JOB:
POETRY AND THEOLOGY IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING**
Spring 2008
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?

DISABILITIES STATEMENT

If you believe you have a disability, then you should contact the Academic Resource Center (arc@georgetown.edu) for further information. The Center is located in the Leavey Center, Suite 335. The Academic Resource Center is the campus office 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.

REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS

Any good Bible, New Revised Standard Version or The Tanakh suggested.

Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job*.

Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*.

Archibald MacLeish, *J.B.: A Play in Verse*.

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: 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: 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 during the course of the semester.

(4) For Master's Students Only: In lieu of the third short paper, you will write a longer 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.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Weeks One through Nine:

We will work through the book of Job in detail, paying close attention to its literary art and to its theological claims and implications.

Weeks Ten through Thirteen: We will read and discuss various appropriations of the book of Job by scholars and theologians, as well as in popular culture.