

Huron



FACULTY OF
THEOLOGY

Fall Term 2026
Redeeming the Texts of Terror (Biblical Studies 260)
LTh Course Syllabus
Exploring Approaches to Violent Texts in the Old Testament

Huron University College Land Acknowledgment

Huron is situated on the traditional lands of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Attawandaron, and Lenape peoples, whose sharing and stewardship of the land has been governed by the Dish with One Spoon treaty since time immemorial. We are guided by this treaty in the spirit of peace, friendship, and respect. Huron University College acknowledges its past role in perpetuating colonial and exclusionary relations. Because religious and ecclesial institutions were instrumental in such relations, we consider it our particular responsibility as a Faculty of Theology to work towards justice and reconciliation.

Course Dates: September 8, 15, 22, 29 and October 6, 13, 20, 27

Time: Tuesday or from 7 – 9 P.M. (CT), 8 – 10 P.M. (ET)

Delivery: Hosted via Zoom

Instructor: Dr. Murray Watson, SSL (Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome), Ph.D. (Trinity College, Dublin)

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Phone: (519) 331-3213

Murray is also happy to arrange for phone or Zoom conversations with course participants during the course, if that is helpful.

Course Description and Objectives

“The problem [of religion and violence] is not peculiar to Islam, but can also be found in attitudes and assumptions that are deeply embedded in the Jewish and Christian scriptures ... what Gerd Lüdemann has called ‘the dark side of the Bible.’” (Dr. John J. Collins, “The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence”; online at: <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/violence-and-theology/bible-and-legitimation-violence>)

“What makes people kill in the name of the God of life, or wage war in the name of the God of peace? What is it that connects religion with violence, or violence and monotheism, or violence and the Abrahamic monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity and Islam? ... Can we deliver a message as powerful as religious extremism, that leads away from violence and toward respect between faiths, whether we’re Jews, Christians, Muslims, or just secular humanists concerned about the future?” (Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks; online at: <https://youtu.be/m6GCnzfenWY?si=5SffhtQ25PsgpUQS>)

“Parts of the Bible are shocking to read, even barbaric, and hard to defend as the Word of God in civil adult conversation. God either orders a lot of killing or does it himself ... Taking the Bible seriously enough to read it carefully, as many Christians can testify to, can generate more than its share of uh-oh moments. The Bible can become a challenge to one’s faith in God rather than the source of faith, a problem to be overcome rather than the answer to our problems. The Holy Bible, the sourcebook for spiritual comfort, guidance, and insight, makes you squirm—or at least fidget. It just won’t do to make believe otherwise. In fact, it’s good to come clean about it and clear the air. The question is what to do about it.” (Dr. Peter Enns, [The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It](#))

There is no denying that there are portions of the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament whose imagery, language, and storylines shock, scandalize, and horrify us today. In a now-famous 1984 book, the feminist Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible aptly described them as “texts of terror”: passages that seem to presume (and endorse?) misogyny, hatred, gleeful violence against “the Other,” and even genocide. For thousands of years, both Jews and Christians have grappled with how to interpret these readings in a way that is morally defensible and spiritually fruitful. In this course, we will explore strategies (both Jewish and Christian, ancient and modern) for reading, interpreting, and praying with a range of texts that have been highly problematic for centuries of readers. Together, we will see if we can “redeem” these texts and find meanings in them that can still speak to us today in ways that can “de-fang” their surface meanings and reveal messages that can nourish us as people of faith in this 21st century.

Required Texts

All readings required for this course will be made available to the students in pdf format through the ChurchX class webpage. No additional texts need to be purchased.

Course Outline/Plan

Week 1 – Introductions and Course Overview – Brief Review of Syllabus and Course Assignments

- Phyllis Trible and the Notion of “Texts of Terror” ([her influential 1984 book](#))
- Enumerating some “texts of terror” and categories:
 - o The Great Flood [Genesis 7-8] (God’s apparent destruction of almost all of humanity)
 - o The saga of Hagar and Ishmael [Genesis 16; 17:18–21; 21:8–21]
 - o God’s annihilation of the Egyptian army during the Exodus [Exodus 14:5-29; Psalm 106:10-11; 136:15]
 - o The violence of the conquest of Canaan, sparing no one [Joshua and Judges]

- The Levite's Concubine [Judges 19]
- Jephthah's Daughter and Her Father's Rash Vow [Judges 11:29–40]
- The Imprecatory (Cursing) Psalms (e.g. Psalm 58; Psalm 83; Psalm 109; Psalm 137:9; Psalm 69: 22-28; Psalm 139:19-22, etc.)

Week 2 - Approach #1: A More Sensitive Appreciation of the Diverse Literary Genres in the Bible and How They Convey Truth in Different Ways

- The Bible: not a single book, but a library of rich theological and literary diversity, written, edited, and compiled over more than 1000 years
- The difference between an older style of *literalist/fundamentalist* reading and a more nuanced, contextualized, and *genre-aware* reading
- Learning to recognize the use of “Semitic hyperbole”/totalizing exaggeration, prophetic satire, apocalyptic, poetic lament, battle poetry, etc. (=Non-literal modes of literary expression)
- Some examples to explore in terms of genre and ancient literary background: Noah and the Ark; the “victory” Psalms and ancient Middle Eastern royal rhetoric, etc.
- How does accurately identifying the genre and cultural context of a text help us to read it more thoughtfully—and less “dangerously”? Are there any human literary genres that are necessarily *excluded*—through which God could theoretically *not* communicate?

Week 3 – Approach #2: Bowdlerization/Censorship/Expurgation (editing and/or removing objectionable texts)

Bowdlerization: a form of censorship that involves editing a book, play, movie, or other creative work by removing or modifying passages deemed vulgar, offensive, or inappropriate for a specific audience. The term derives from an English physician named Dr. Thomas Bowdler (1754–1825). Bowdler is most famous for publishing a heavily edited, 10-volume edition of William Shakespeare's plays (*The Family Shakespeare*, 1818). He proudly stated on the title page that his goal was to remove words and expressions “which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family”. The eponym *bowdlerize* (and the noun *bowdlerization*) entered the English language by the mid-1830s to describe any excessive, puritanical censorship of art.

- Inner-Biblical re-interpretation: Evidence of editing *within the Old Testament itself* over time
Chronicles' idealized/selective re-writing of the stories of David and Solomon: what is included, and what is omitted in those re-tellings
- Examples of similar dynamics evident in the evolution of New Testament manuscripts (the woman caught in adultery, in John 7:53–8:11; the correct verb in Mark 1:41; the vanishing words in Matthew 24:36, etc.)¹
- Marcion and his complete rejection of the Old Testament (and Judaism)

¹ See, for example, Bart Ehrman's 1993 book *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*: “It challenges the long-held assumption that scribal errors in early Christian manuscripts were necessarily accidental (e.g., misspellings, skipped lines). Instead, Ehrman argues that many textual variants were intentional alterations made by scribes belonging to the ‘proto-orthodox’ party. These scribes modified texts to align them with their own developing theology and to close off interpretive loopholes that rival Christian factions (‘heretics’) were using to support their views.” (Gemini)

- Suggestions of editing the Old Testament to remove objectionable portions (e.g. the “neo-Marcionism” of Adolf von Harnack in the late 19th century, and the long tradition of “children’s Bibles” and “story Bibles”)
- The criteria used in selecting modern lectionary and other liturgical texts (including the Psalms used in the Roman Lectionary for Mass, and the Liturgy of the Hours)

Week 4 – Approach #3: The Contributions (and Questions) of Archaeology and History

Israel Finkelstein and Amihai Mazar. *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel*. Edited by Brian B. Schmidt. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007.

Jennie Ebeling, Paul Flesher, Edward Wright, and Mark Elliott, eds. *The Old Testament in Archaeology and History*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017.

Janzen, Mark D., ed. *Five Views on the Exodus: Historicity, Chronology, and Theological Implications*. Zondervan Counterpoints Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2021.

- Did these events *actually happen* as they are described—or could these be intended as something *other than* a literal account of historical events (as we understand history today) (again, the question of accurately identifying the literary genre and intent of books and passages)?
- Could these passages (likely written many centuries after these events) have expressed how later generations *wished* that history had unfolded (or with reference to the situations in which they themselves were living)?
- Absolutist claims in some books ... and mitigated claims in other books (e.g. Numbers vs. Joshua)
- The hotly-debated example of Jericho and Ai, and the related archaeological excavations

Week 5 – Approach #4: Drawing Upon the Heritage of Jewish Interpretations (both ancient and more modern)

- The traditional Jewish Concept of the “Oral Torah” as complementing (and guiding the interpretation of) the “Written Torah”
 - o E.g. “An Eye for an Eye, A Tooth for a Tooth” (the Law of Talion): Exodus 21:23-25; Leviticus 24:19-20; Deuteronomy 19:16-21
- Regarding God’s drowning of the Egyptian army during the Exodus [Exodus 14:5-29]

Week 6 – Approach #5: Biblical Violence as Resistance Literature of the Oppressed/Powerless/Suffering

- Some contemporary scholars have contributed to interpretations that frame certain violent or vengeful passages in the Hebrew Bible as expressions of resistance, lament, or imaginative “fantasy” from positions of social and political powerlessness—rather than straightforward historical reports or divine endorsements of violence.
- This perspective dramatically reframes “challenging and morally dubious” passages (e.g., *herem*/ban commands in Deuteronomy/Joshua, imprecatory psalms, or prophetic oracles

of judgment), shifting them from *literal history* to *rhetorical/theological expression*. This approach delegitimizes the oppressors, affirms God's justice, and prevents the powerless from internalizing despair or resorting to real violence. This humanizes the texts as products of suffering people rather than divine endorsements of atrocities.

- If this is true, how might it change our moral and spiritual evaluation of these texts? Do we feel they could become usable in new ways?

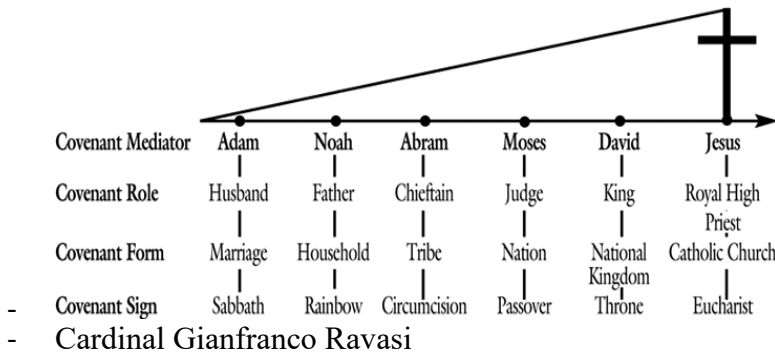
Week 7 – Approach #6: Spiritualization/Allegorization/Symbolic Interpretation of the Text (especially in the Church Fathers and Middle Ages)

- Using the toolkit of “spiritual/more-than-literal interpretations” (deeply rooted in both Judaism and Christianity), the violent landscape of the Old Testament was effectively *internalized*, turning an outward history of physical warfare into an inward guide for spiritual psychology, self-examination, and growth
- John L. Thompson, [*Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone*](#) (Eerdmans, 2007) and the [*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*](#) series
- Origen's interpretation of the slaughter of the Canaanites in his *Homilies on Joshua*
- Augustine, Jerome, and Benedict of Nursia on Psalm 137:9 (“Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”)
- Jephthah's Sacrifice of his Daughter (Judges 11): Ambrose of Milan and other patristic authors

Week 8 – Approach #7: The Bible as Witness to God's Progressive Revelation/Acknowledging the Historical-Cultural Conditioning (and thus Time-Bound-ness) of Ancient Texts (sometimes referred to as a “salvation-historical” approach)

Progressive Revelation: “the theological concept that God's character and redemptive plan unfold gradually across the biblical timeline, culminating in the person of Jesus Christ. This framework highlights a profound spiritual evolution within the text, tracking humanity's understanding of God from the strict laws and localized covenants of ancient Israel to the universal, grace-centered message of the New Testament”

- St. Augustine: “the New Testament lies hidden in the Old while the Old is revealed in the New”
 - Patristic and medieval “typological” exegesis: Scriptural foreshadowings of later events/people
 - Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (1948)
 - C.S. Lewis on the imprecatory/cursing Psalms
 - Dr. Scott Hahn and his protégés (such as Dr. John Bergsma) on the successive Biblical covenants
- From Hahn's *A Father Who Keeps His Promises*, p. 35:



- The potential *downside* of this approach: it is a specifically *Christian* framing, which tends to denigrate the Old Testament, suggesting it is merely a “stepping-stone” on the way to the New Testament (which makes no sense to Jewish people, and tends to demean and diminish Judaism as an “inferior” religion that has perhaps been “surpassed” or “superseded” by Christianity)
- Conclusion and review of main ideas in the course
- Remaining questions and suggestions for ongoing learning

Method of Evaluation and Criteria for Grading

(only for students choosing to be evaluated for full course credit)

There will be two course assignments:

1. Personal response to a video (worth 40%; due during Week 5 of the course)
Watch the episode of “The Bible for Normal People” podcast on “What to Do About Violence in the Bible?” with Caroline Blyth & Emily Colgan
(<https://youtu.be/sD43EBvkAGM?si=890LA6TmsqZy0ZU> ; about 45 minutes long)
In one single-spaced typed page (1” margins, 12-point font), share: (1) What were your feelings *during* and *after* watching this video? (2) What in this video was new or thought-provoking for you? (3) What questions did it leave you with afterward?
2. A 15-minute video discussion of course content (60%; within the two weeks after the course)
What in our course was most interesting/worthwhile/helpful for you?
What was most difficult/challenging/“an uphill slog” for you?
How do you think you might be able to make use of your course learnings in the future, either personally or in ministry?
What concrete suggestions would you offer for improving this course in the future?

AN INTRODUCTORY BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Boyd, Gregory A. *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence*. Fortress Press, 2017

Copan, Paul. *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God*. Baker Books, 2011.

- Copan, Paul, and Matthew Flannagan. *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God*. Baker Books, 2014.
- Cowles, C. S., et al. *Shoah: No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*. Zondervan, 2003.
- Jenkins, Philip. *Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses*. HarperOne, 2011.
- Jewish Publication Society. *The Jewish Study Bible: Torah, Nevi'im, Kethuvim*. Edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, Second edition, Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Lamb, David T. *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist?* IVP Books, 2011.
- Lynch, Matthew J. *Flood and Fury: Old Testament Violence and the Shalom of God*. IVP Academic, 2023.
- Schwartz, Regina M. *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Seibert, Eric A. *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God*. Augsburg Fortress, 2009.
- Seibert, Eric A. *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy*. Fortress Press, 2012.
- Trimm, Charlie. *The Destruction of the Canaanites: God, Genocide, and Biblical Interpretation*. Eerdmans, 2022.
- Walton, John H., and J. Harvey Walton. *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest: Covenant, Retribution, and the Justice of God*. IVP Academic, 2017.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith*. Zondervan Academic, 2008.
- Zenger, Erich. *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*. Translated by Linda M. Maloney. Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

Huron Grade Descriptors

A+	90-100	One could scarcely expect better from a student at this level
A	80-89	Superior work which is clearly above average
B	70-79	Good work, meeting all requirements, and eminently satisfactory
C	60-69	Competent work, meeting requirements
D	50-59	Fair work, minimally acceptable
F	below 50	Fail

Student Code of Conduct

Membership in the community of Huron University College and Western University implies acceptance by every student of the principle of respect for the rights, responsibilities, dignity and well-being of others and a readiness to support an environment conducive to the intellectual and personal growth of all who study, work, and live

within it. Upon registration, students assume the responsibilities that such registration entails. While in the physical or online classroom, students are expected to behave in a manner that supports the learning environment of others. Please review the Student Code of Conduct at:

<https://huronatwestern.ca/sites/default/files/Res%20Life/Student%20Code%20of%20Conduct%20-%20Revised%20September%202019.pdf>.

Statement on the Recording of Class Activities

Students may not record or distribute any class activity, including conversations during office hours, without written permission from the instructor, except as necessary as part of approved accommodations for students with disabilities. Any approved recordings may only be used for the student's own private use.

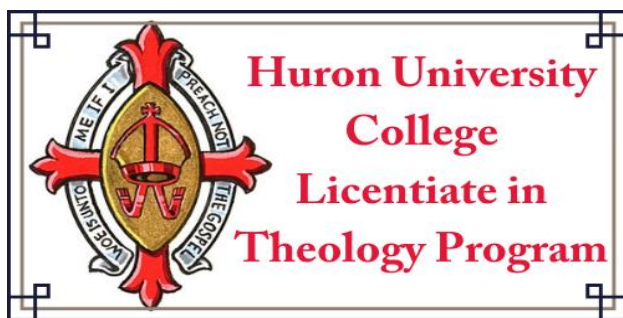
Online courses within the Licentiate in Theology Program are recorded for student engagement purposes. These recordings are only used by the registered students of the class and made available through a restricted video hosting site to respect both privacy and intellectual property. Should a student be uncomfortable with this practice, they can contact the course instructor or the LTh Program Director, Dr. Grayhame Bowcott at grayhame.bowcott@huron.uwo.ca

Statement of Prohibition on the Use of AI

As the primary purpose of Huron's Licentiate in Theology Program is to enable critical thinking, spiritual growth, the cultivation of individual ministry skillsets, and personal discernment for future ministry leadership, this means that we expect our students to offer up only their own ideas and original contributions of writing, assignments, and evaluative content. Any and all use of AI (Artificial Intelligence) is strictly prohibited within this program. Any student who violates this prohibition will be disqualified from receiving credit for the course they are taking. Any student who repeatedly violates this prohibition may risk expulsion from the LTh Program.

Support Services

For advice on course selections, degree requirements, and assistance with requests for medical accommodation, students should contact the LTh Coordinator, Chris Travers, at chris.travers@huron.uwo.ca



THIS COURSE HAS BEEN APPROVED BY HURON'S FACULTY OF THEOLOGY COMMITTEE
FOR THE FALL TERM OF THE LTH PROGRAM, 2026.