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THE PSALMS
Reformed Seminary - Orlando
(2OT704/01)

Course Description:

This course covers the major types of psalms, the use to which they have been put throughout history, and legitimate ways of reading and interpreting them today. Consideration is also given to the contexts of the psalms: their ancient Near Eastern context, their context in Israelite history, their theological context within the Biblical canon, and their literary context within the Book of Psalms. Selected topics arising from the psalms are also covered.

Course Goals:

Upon successful completion of this course, students will have demonstrated a proper grasp of

1. The overall message of the Book of Psalms.
2. The major critical and theological issues associated with the Book of Psalms.
3. Proper ways of interpreting and using the Psalms in the present day.
4. Good research, exegetical, and reading skills.

In addition, the course seeks to stimulate in students a new appreciation for the messages of this book and to hear God's word for today speaking through it.

Required Textbooks:

1. *The Bible*. NASB, ESV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, NJPSV, NLT, HCSB are recommended English versions. Use of the Hebrew Bible is encouraged, though not required.
2. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72, 73–150*. Tyndale OT Commentaries. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973, 1975. ISBN: 978-0-8778-4264-4 and 978-0-8778-4265-1 (paper).

3. Mark D. Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook*. Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007. ISBN: 978-0-8254-2765-7 (paper).
4. David Firth and Philip S. Johnston, eds., *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005. ISBN: 978-0-8308-2833-3 (paper).

Course Requirements:

1. Reading, Class Preparation, and Discussion (40 points)

- A. Book of Psalms (12 pts):** You will read the Book of Psalms through twice in its entirety for this course. First (**6 pts.**), you should read it through in two sittings, Psalms 1-72 in the first sitting and Psalms 73-150 in the second. You should do this *before* the course begins, and account for it by signing the reading-report form at the end of this syllabus. *The two-sitting requirement is an indispensable requirement and may not be altered.*

A second time (**6 pts.**), you should read the book more slowly, in a devotional fashion, roughly 10-11 psalms per day, from January 14-28. Each day, you are to record the number of total psalms you read, and then the following for two psalms (of your choice) from that day’s section: (1) a summary of the psalm’s message in two or three sentences; (2) personal interactions with the psalm, three or four sentences in length. These interactions may be of many different types (praise, thanksgiving, lament, intercession, confession, etc., stimulated by the psalm), but it must be your *personal* response to the psalm. The notes you make on the psalms must be turned in twice:

Psalms 1–72: January 21

Psalms 73–150: January 28

In addition, you must read and outline each psalm to be covered in class—separately from the reading above—prior to coming to class, and you should be prepared to contribute to class discussion based on this reading. Usually, I will give you special instructions as to how they are to be read.

- B. Required Textbooks (18 pts.):** You are to read portions of Kidner and Firth and Johnston, and all of Futato, before the course begins (see below for specific pages). You may account for the Kidner reading using the form at the end of the syllabus. For the Firth and Johnston and the Futato books, you are to write a 4-5 (double-spaced) page summary and reaction paper for each one. In these papers, you should summarize their basic content and special emphases, and then provide a critical evaluation. If you do not feel competent to evaluate the works, then include a series of questions for clarification or further study that arise from your reading of these books. You must have these papers ready to submit on the first day of class.

2 pts: Kidner, pp. 1-46

8 pts: Firth and Johnston, chaps. 1-5, 8-9, 11-13

8 pts: Futato, entire book

In addition, you should read the relevant pages in Kidner’s commentary for every psalm covered in class, before coming to class that day.

C. Other Reading (5 pts): Other readings are assigned (see schedule below), of which copies will be handed out in class or Web site addresses furnished. These are due as indicated on the schedule or by in-class instructions.

D. Class preparation and participation (5 pts): Daily discussion will be based upon the readings for each class, which are to be done prior to coming to class. The grade here will be determined by degree of completion of the reading assignments, and class attendance, participation, and interaction.

2. Papers (50 points)

Two papers are required in the course, one topical and one exegetical. You may choose any topic relevant to the course, and any psalm (except ones covered in class). The *text* of each paper of these shall consist of 7–8 pages (excluding title page, endnotes, bibliography, etc.). These papers are due at 4:00 pm at Ceci Helm’s desk on the following dates:

Topical Paper: February 8

Exegetical Paper: February 22

Late papers will be penalized proportionately. Instructions for the papers are attached at the end of the syllabus. You should steer clear of study Bible notes or simple Bible handbooks, and primarily do your own work, relying occasionally on more substantive resources, such as those discussed in class.

3. Integrative Project (10 points)

At the end of the course, you will write an essay during the final hour of class explaining the Book of Psalms to an adult Sunday School class. You may use your Bible and any notes of your own in writing this essay, but no other outside helps. The essay should be comprehensive and should outline for laypeople why and how they should use the Book of Psalms with profit.

Due Dates

January 14: Reading: Psalms 1-150 (two sittings)

Required textbooks (and reports)

January 14-18 (during class week):

Reading: Other (handed out in class or online)

January 18: Integrative project (in class)

January 21: First devotional reading report (Psalms 1-72)

January 28: Second devotional reading report (Psalms 73-150)

February 8: Topical paper

February 22: Exegetical paper

Grading Summary

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| Psalms – 1 st reading | 6 pts |
| Psalms – 2 nd reading (1-72) | 3 pts |
| Psalms – 2 nd reading (73-150) | 3 pts |
| Reading - Kidner | 2 pts |
| Reading – Firth & Johnston | 8 pts |
| Reading – Futato | 8 pts |
| Reading – Other | 5 pts |
| Class prep & participation | 5 pts |
| Topical paper | 25 pts |
| Exegetical paper | 25 pts |
| Integrative project | 10 pts. |
| Total | 100 pts |

Grading Scale

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| 97-100 | A |
| 94-96 | A- |
| 91-93 | B+ |
| 88-90 | B |
| 86-87 | B- |
| 83-85 | C+ |
| 80-82 | C |
| 78-79 | C- |
| 75-77 | D+ |
| 72-74 | D |
| 70-71 | D- |
| 0-69 | F |

COURSE SCHEDULE

Topics Covered:

Hebrew Poetry

The Composition of the Psalter

Read: G. H. Wilson, "The Shape of the Book of Psalms,"
***Interpretation* 46 (1992), 129-42.**

The Psalm Types

Read: S. Carney, "God Damn God: A Reflection on Expressing
Anger in Prayer," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (Oct 1983),
116-20.

Psalms of the Ancient Near East

Read: Selections from W. W. Hallo and K. L. Younger, Jr., eds., *The*
Context of Scripture, vol. 1: *Canonical Compositions from the*
Biblical World (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997):

(1) "The Great Hymn to the Aten" (translated by
Miriam Lichtheim)

(2) "Prayer to Marduk" and "Prayer to the Gods of
the Night" (translated by Benjamin R.
Foster)

(3) "Assurbanipal's Coronation Hymn," "An
Assurbanipal Hymn for Shamash," and
"An Assurbanipal Prayer for Mulissu"
(translated by Alasdair Livingstone.

Messianic Psalms

Imprecatory Psalms

The Use of the Psalms

Psalms Covered:

The course will proceed inductively, covering the selected psalms from the following group. You are to read the commentary by Kidner for all psalms covered here. In addition to the psalms listed below, you will be asked to read some psalmic materials from the ancient Near East (to be handed out in class).

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| Psalm 1 | Psalms 46–48 |
| Psalm 2 | Psalm 51 |
| Psalms 3–4 | Psalm 88 |
| Psalm 7 | Psalm 93 |
| Psalm 8 | Psalm 100 |
| Psalm 30 | Psalm 109 |
| Psalm 32 | Psalm 113 |
| Psalm 33 | Psalm 110 |
| Psalms 42–43 | Psalm 150 |

TURN IN THIS SHEET AT THE END OF THE COURSE

READING REPORT # 1

By signing my name below, I affirm that I have read Psalms 1-72 in one sitting.

SIGNATURE _____ **DATE:** _____

READING REPORT # 2

By signing my name below, I affirm that I have read Psalms 73-150 in one sitting.

SIGNATURE _____ **DATE:** _____

READING REPORT # 3

By signing my name below, I affirm that I have read all of the assigned **introductory** reading in **Kidner (pp. 1–46)**.

SIGNATURE _____ **DATE:** _____

READING REPORT # 4

By signing my name below, I affirm that I have read all of the assigned reading in **Kidner (all assigned psalms)**.

SIGNATURE _____ **DATE:** _____

READING REPORT # 5

By signing my name below, I affirm that I have read all of the assigned **non-textbook readings (Wilson, Carney, Hallo & Younger selections)**:

SIGNATURE _____ **DATE:** _____

INSTRUCTIONS FOR PSALMS PAPERS

1. Topical Papers

These papers may be on any topic of your choosing. A list of suggested topics is given below, but you are not required to limit yourself to this list. If a topic you are interested in does not appear on the list of suggestions, then you must have the topic approved by the professor. *All topics should be discussed with the professor*, however, in order to discuss the feasibility of the topic, the scope and approach of the paper, etc.

Outside resources should be used for such papers, and properly referenced in standard bibliographic format. The course textbooks are helpful places for beginning research on given topics, but you should also check Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias for given topics. Other resource works may be found in the library or on the Internet. Check the “Web Links” page of the professor’s Web page for places to begin such research.

References to study Bible notes and lay-oriented Bible handbooks are not acceptable.

Cautionary note: *However*, your paper should most definitely *not* be simply a compendium of strung-together references and quotes from various scholarly sources on any given topic. Your paper *must also* show evidence of *your own engagement* with the text of the Book of Psalms. In other words, you must show your own original thinking in your paper, including supporting references to specific psalms or verses. The paper must be rooted in *your own reading* of the Psalter, not just others’ work on this. As such, the choice of a clearly delimited topic is important, since this must all be accomplished within the scope of 7-8 text pages. (For a clearer statement of the philosophy behind this paragraph, see the materials on “The Student, the Fish, and Agassiz” on the “Resources” page of the professor’s Web site.)

Suggested Topics:

An individual psalm genre (type): hymn, thanksgiving, lament, royal, wisdom, penitential, trust, imprecation, etc.
Imprecatory psalms
Messianic psalms
The afterlife in the Psalms
The enemies in the Psalms
Psalm titles
The “historical” psalm titles
The composition and shaping of the Psalter
Words for *sin*
The poor
Vocabulary of worship
Use of laments in the Church

2. Exegetical Papers

These papers must be based on *your own* original study of one psalm. **You are not allowed to consult any commentary for this paper.** Any use of a commentary—whether acknowledged or not—will result in a grade reduction. You should make use of concordances or other reference tools for any word studies, however. The paper must contain the following sections.

- (1) *Introduction:* One paragraph should introduce the psalm, orienting the reader to the psalm and its overall message. This should be written at the end of the process of producing the paper, but placed at the beginning of the paper.
- (2) *Text and Outline:* Include the text of the psalm from the primary English Bible version that you used for the paper. The text should be divided into paragraphs according to your own analysis of the major sense units of the psalm. Do not simply copy someone else’s outline, but produce your own.
- (3) *Poetic and Structural Analysis:* Include an analysis of the poetic structure of the psalm. This should be at two levels: (a) the line level, and (b) the overall poetic structural level. In this section, you should justify your paragraph analysis from # (2).
- (4) *Theological Analysis:* Here you should concentrate on important theological concepts found in the psalm, whether at the word level (i.e., short word studies), or at the sentence level (i.e., important theological statements or affirmations, usually in one or two verses), or at the paragraph level (i.e., the overall flow of thought in the paragraphs).
- (5) *Relevance:* Include a reflection and/or suggestions as to how the main ideas of the psalm are relevant to some aspect of contemporary life.

Style and Formatting Guidelines for All Papers

You must type the papers neatly, doubled-spaced, using a 12-point font. Please number and staple the pages together. Any standard scheme of footnotes, endnotes, or text notes found in Kate L. Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers* is acceptable. However, you must use it consistently, and provide full and proper documentation for any sources used, including a separate bibliography appended to the paper. You should list works by author and title of the book, commentary, or article [*not* editor!], with any series name and editor appearing at the appropriate place.

You must follow standard academic writing procedures, including writing in your own words, giving proper credit when quoting or referring to material from another work, and writing in good English. If you have trouble writing in English, you should have your papers proofread by someone conversant in English writing skills *prior to* writing the papers. Your paper’s grade will suffer if you do not follow the guidelines in this paragraph.