

Department of Religion
Gustavus Adolphus College

REL 214-001
Individual & Morality
(THEOL)

Fall 2021
Dr. Samuel J. Kessler
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T/R
10:30-11:50AM
(Old Main 006)

Office Hours:
12-1PM T/R
(& by Appointment)

Course Catalogue Description

This course explores the historical and social context in which moral problems develop and in which human beings and their communities respond to them. It investigates the ways in which politics, science, art, and religion (for example) influence the formulation and resolution of moral problems. Non-Western approaches to ethics, morality, and individuality will also be used in comparative analysis. We raise questions about the widely held view that values in morals, politics, science, art, and religion are merely matters of taste.

Course Outline

This course is designed as a commentary on the central text of the Western theological tradition: the Book of Genesis. On Tuesdays, we will closely read a series of stories in Genesis, discussing and elaborating on their themes, motifs, messages, and uncertainties. On Thursdays, we will discuss a commentary (classical, medieval, or modern) on one of those stories. Our task this semester will be to both understand and contest the various depictions and assumptions around the individual and the moral universe in which one lives as they are portrayed in the biblical narrative and the accompanying commentary. What role does God play in formulating individual morality? What can we learn about how human interpretations of moral expectations and arrangements develop over time? Can a foundation text, such as Genesis, ever be *immoral*? Can societies maintain multiple moral systems simultaneously?

In the end, we not only will we be studying important works of theology but also probing our own inner lives, asking how and why we hold our moral positions, where the authority for those positions originates, and under what circumstances and through which experiences we might be willing to change our moral beliefs and actions.

This class has no prerequisites. The professor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus, including assignment due dates. These changes will be announced as early as possible.

Guidelines & Policies

Course Readings & Communications

Readings for this course can be found either as a PDF on Moodle or under the list of Required Texts below. You can purchase all required books at The Book Mark or online. Readings should be completed before the Tuesday class for the week that they are listed. *You must bring each text to both classes for the week it is assigned, either as a PDF or physical copy.*

You are responsible for checking your Gustavus email (<https://gusmail.gac.edu/>) regularly for communications about the course.

Accommodations Resource Policy

Those who qualify under Gustavus policies and guidelines for reasonable accommodation should alert the professor privately at the start of the semester. Information concerning programs through College's Center for Academic Resources and Enhancement (CARE) can be found at https://gustavus.edu/general_catalog/current/.

Assignment Policies

All assignments must be uploaded via Moodle. You will be penalized 10% for each day a paper is late. Papers submitted over one week after the deadline will not be accepted. If you are ill or have a family emergency please contact the professor as soon as possible.

All assignments must be written in 12-point font, Times New Roman or Garamond, with 1-inch margins.

When uploading assignments, files must be labeled as follows:
Lastname_AssignmentName_REL 214-001 (Spring 2021)

The Gustavus Writing Center provides helpful overviews and links for improving your writing. They also have appointment services available to help edit papers or discuss the writing process with a tutor. You can find more information on these services at <https://gustavus.edu/writingcenter/>.

Note: You may receive, but should not expect, a response from the professor concerning help on papers beginning 24-hours prior to their due date.

University Honor Code

The Undergraduate Honor Code states: "On my honor, I pledge that I have not given, received, or tolerated others' use of unauthorized aid in completing this work." For additional information about the Honor Code, visit https://gustavus.edu/general_catalog/current/.

Required Texts

- *Genesis*, trans. Robert Alter (Norton 1996).

Course Assignments & Expectations

Class Attendance and Participation

Attendance will be taken during each class period. If you arrive late and attendance has already been taken you are responsible for alerting the professor to your presence. Arrivals more than ten minutes after class begins, or continuous tardiness, will be counted as absence. More than two unexcused absences will impact your final grade by 2% per absence. If you have more than six unexcused absences, you cannot receive a course grade higher than a C. Please notify the professor as soon as possible for absences related to illness or family emergencies. For more information, the Gustavus Class Attendance Policy can be found at https://gustavus.edu/general_catalog/current/acainfo.

Class participation points are based on the following criteria: arriving in class on time; being awake and attentive during lecture; being responsive and active during discussions and small group activities; respectfully listening when others are speaking; and being engaged in the course without checking your mobile devices. Failure to meet these criteria will result in the loss of participation points throughout the semester.

Moodle Forums

Five (5) times during the semester you will be responsible for Moodle-based discussion board posts, reading exercises, or group work. These will supplement for cancelled class periods as well as help you further engage the assigned material.

Assignments and groups are posted on Moodle. *Responses are due by 11:59pm on the date listed.*

(Due Sun., Sept. 19; Wed., Sept. 22; Wed., Sept. 29; Wed., Oct. 6; Wed., Oct. 27)

Primary-Source Line Commentary (3 pages, double-spaced)

For this assignment, you will begin by selecting one of the assigned course texts *that are not Genesis* (this will be your “primary source”).

Next, you will choose one or two passages (about 15-20 sentences total). You should choose a passage that you find interesting or challenging, or one that you think best expresses the moral and/or theological intentions of the text.

Taking the passage(s) one sentence at a time, you will type out the first sentence, and then beneath it you will explain or comment on that sentence. *(Use different fonts for each section: one for the primary source and one for your own words.)*

Once you have commented on the first sentence, on a new line, type the second sentence and repeat the process. You will do this for the entire passage or until you have reached the bottom of your third page.

Note: Your commentaries for each sentence might vary in length. Sometimes a sentence or two might suffice, but sometimes you might need a number of paragraphs to help explain, elucidate, or give examples for what the texts is saying.

You will complete *two* primary-source line commentaries during the semester.

You must submit the assignment *on Moodle* before class the day it is due.

(Due Thurs., Oct. 14 & Thurs., Dec. 9)

Writing & Journal Responses (2 pages, single-spaced [handwritten] & 3 pages, double-spaced [typed])
This assignment is divided into two parts.

For *part one*, you must choose a chapter from Genesis. Choose a chapter that most interests or challenges you, or one that speaks directly to an issue you think is morally or ethically salient. Then, on a piece of standard college rule paper (8.5" x 11"), *copy out longhand* (using pencil or pen) as much of this chapter as will fit on the front side of the page. When completed, take a separate sheet and copy out again *the same section* of the passage in longhand (again as much as will fit on the front side of the page). (You will need to create a PDF of your handwritten pages to upload to Moodle.)

For *part two*, write a three-page commentary on the *entire chapter* (not just what you have written out longhand). Your response should address the question: *What is at stake in this text?* To explain your answer, evaluate the theological, ethical, historical, and personal issues the text discussed. When explaining *what is at stake*, try and explain what the text believes *is possible and impossible* both *in the world* and *from God*, and what the world *could or should* look like if the implications of the text were truly taken seriously.

You will complete *three* writing and journal responses during the semester.

You must submit both parts of the assignment *on Moodle* before class *as a single PDF* on the day it is due.

(Due Thurs., Sept. 30; Thurs., Nov. 4; & Tues., Nov. 23)

Grading

Class Attendance and Participation	15
Moodle Assignment I	5
Moodle Assignment II	5
Moodle Assignment III	5
Moodle Assignment IV	5
Moodle Assignment V	5
Primary Source Line Commentary (#1)	15
Primary Source Line Commentary (#2)	15
Writing & Journal Response (#1)	10
Writing & Journal Response (#2)	10
Writing & Journal Response (#3)	<u>10</u>
	100

ScheduleWeek 1: September 7-9

Introduction: Who is the Individual and What is Morality?

Suggested

- Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, “The Conflict Between Individual and Social Morality”
- Abraham J. Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, “What We Might Do Together”

***No class Tues., Sept. 7 (*Rosh Hashanah*)**Week 2: September 14-16

Creating Worlds: Adam & Eve

Readings

- Gen. 1-3
- St. Augustine, *The City of God*, Bk. 14 (chs. 1-7, 11-14)

Suggested

- Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, pp. 173-177

No class Thurs., Sept. 16 (*Yom Kippur*)**Moodle Forum I (due Sun., Sept. 19)**Week 3: September 21-23

Destroying Worlds: Cain & Abel; Noah & His Sons; Babel

Readings

- Gen. 4-11
- St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, Homily 19 (Gen. 4:16)

Suggested

- Introduction to Rabbinic Midrash on Cain & Abel
- Saint Ambrose, “Cain and Abel”

No class Tues., Sept. 21 (*Sukkot*)**Moodle Forum II (due Wed., Sept. 22)**Week 4: September 28-30

Sojourns in Foreign Lands; the Plight of Hagar

Reading

- Gen. 12-16
- Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, pp. 107-124

Suggested

- Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, “Abraham”

No class Tues., Sept. 28 (*Shmini Atzeret*)**Moodle Forum III (due Wed., Sept. 29)*****Writing & Journal Response #1 (due Thur., Sept. 30)**

Week 5: October 5-7

Cities of the Plain

Readings

- Gen. 17-20
- Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (on Gen. 18, Sodom & Gomorrah)

Suggested

- Dershowitz, *Abraham*, “God Tests Abraham and Abraham Passes—At Least the First Test

***No Class Tues., Oct. 5 (Nobel Conference)**

***Moodle Forum IV (due Wed., Oct. 6)**

Week 6: October 12-14

Wives & Sons: Abraham & Sarah, Isaac & Rebecca (Part 1)

Readings

- Gen. 21-23
- Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear & Trembling*, pp. 9-23

Suggested

- Robert Gordis, “The Faith of Abraham: A Note on Kierkegaard’s ‘Teleological Suspension of the Ethical,’” esp. 416 ff.

***Primary Source Line Commentary #1 (due Thur., Oct. 14)**

Week 7: October 19-21

Sons & Brothers: Isaac & Rebecca, Jacob & Esau (Part 2)

Readings

- Gen. 24-26
- Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (commentary on 25:19-34)

Suggested

- Ramban (Nachmanides) on Gen. 25:29-34

Week 8: October 28

Blessings Stolen & Bestowed

Readings

- Gen. 27-28
- Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer on Gen. 28

Suggested

- Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire*, “Sincerity and Authenticity”

***No Class Tues., Oct. 26 (Fall Break)**

***Moodle Forum V (due Wed., Oct. 27)**

Week 9: November 2-4

The Family of Jacob

Readings

- Gen. 29-33
- Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, “The Adventures of Jacob”

Suggested

- Jonathan Edwards, *The ‘Blank Bible’* (commentary on Gen 29-33)
- J.E. Lapsley, “The Voice of Rachel: Resistance and Polyphony in Genesis 31:14-35”

***Writing & Journal Response #2 (due Thur., Nov. 4)**Week 10: November 9-11

The Trials of Dina

Readings

- Gen. 34
- Susanne Scholz, “Through Whose Eyes? A ‘Right’ Reading of Genesis 34”

Suggested

- Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, “The Outrage at Shechem”

Week 11: November 16-18

Joseph & His Brothers I

Readings

- Gen. 35-37
- Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, “The Joseph Narrative: The Hidden Call of God”

Suggested

- Shai Held, “In Praise of Isaac”

Week 12: November 23

Tamar & Judah

Readings

- Gen. 38
- Avital Hochstein, “Tamar’s Choice: Different Models of Loyalty”

Suggested

- Robert Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 1-24

Writing & Journal Response #3 (due Tues., Nov. 23)**No Class Thurs., Nov. 25 (Thanksgiving)**Week 13: November 30-December 2

Accusations & Dreams

Readings

- Gen. 39-41
- Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (on Gen. 39, Potiphar’s wife; Gen. 41, governance)

Suggested

- Dina Weiss, “Storing Fortune for the Future”

Week 14: December 7-9

Joseph & His Brothers II

Readings

- Gen. 42-45
- Saint Ambrose, *Joseph*

Suggested

- Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, “Joseph and His Brothers”
- Elie Kaunfer, “The Meanings of Approach”

***Primary Source Line Commentary #2 (due Thurs., Dec. 9)**

Week 15: December 14

The Blessings of Jacob

Readings

- Gen. 46-50

Suggested

- Jonathan Sacks, “When Is It Permitted to Tell a Lie?”

“Better a poor but wise boy than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to be wary. For from the prison-house he came out to be king, for in his kingship, too, the impoverished man was born.”

Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) 4:13-14

Appropriate Email Etiquette

This sheet is intended to help you compose formal and appropriate emails to your professors and/or anyone employed by the College.

You should follow these guidelines *every time* you compose an email message, *unless specifically instructed otherwise*.

How to Compose an Appropriate Email

- Include a clear, direct subject line
- Begin your email with a professional, formal salutation
 - Begin with “Dear” or “Hello,” *always avoid* “Hi” or “Hey”
 - Address the person with his/her highest formal title (e.g., Dr., Prof., Ms., Mr., &c.)
- Space your message appropriately
 - Never send a long, run-on paragraph
- Provide background on your question or comment
 - Assume the recipient does not know the context of your note
- Never send a single line response (even if the message is part of a chain)
- Use normal font styles and sizes
- End your note formally and with your typed name
 - Above your name, write “Sincerely” or “All the best” or “Regards”
 - Never end *only* with an automatic signature

When Applicable

- Never assume the answer to a question, especially if it involves asking someone for their time
- Be explicit about specific needs or requests
 - Bold or italicize times, dates, and deadlines
- Give your recipient at least *one business day* (i.e. not Saturday or Sunday) to answer, *even* if it feels like an emergency to you
- Use your professional (college) email address

What to Avoid

- Never *begin* an email without a formal salutation
- Never address your professors by their first name *unless specifically instructed otherwise*
- Never *end* an email simply with an automatic signature—always type your name, first and/or last
- Never send an email you haven’t read at least twice

*Remember:

Nothing you write in an email is permanently confidential. *Absolutely nothing*. Go to the email recipient *in person* with anything that might be best not written down.