

# BRIERCREST

## BLST 817/849 OT/NT Specialty: The Art of Biblical Narrative Fall 2023

Professor: Dr. Keith Bodner

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Course Dates: Zoom Lectures on Tuesday, September 19 until Tuesday, October 31, 2023

Course Delivery Method: Online

3 Credit Hours

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

There are many ways of reading biblical narrative and exploring its richness, and various methods (such as historical, sociological, and theological approaches) have been used in the past. This course will introduce and develop a literary approach to biblical narrative—highlighting and drawing attention to a number of examples in the process—and we will focus on general literary features such as plot, character, point of view, creation of suspense and intrigue, and irony. Through collaborative discussions that center around various texts such as the garden story in Genesis and the journey of Joseph, the rebellion of Absalom in 2 Samuel, and some New Testament material in the Gospels and the book of Acts, by the end of our journey we will be further along the road of apprehending the vast unities and complexities of biblical narrative and its artistry.

### COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the place of literary criticism when studying the Bible, and to acknowledge the value of such an approach for interpretation.
2. To appreciate the literary beauty and artistic complexity of biblical narrative in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and to discern how the various literary elements contribute to the theological landscape of the canon.
3. To undertake a literary analysis of selected biblical passages and become acquainted with the skills and signals involved in a close reading of the text.
4. To take preliminary steps toward disseminating our research on the art of biblical narrative to various audiences in the academic world.

### COURSE TEXTS

Keith Bodner, *Jeroboam's Royal Drama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Keith Bodner, *The Rebellion of Absalom*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Keith Bodner, *The Economy of Grace in the Parables of Jesus* (forthcoming; free ebook provided for each student).

Any other course materials will be posted electronically on Canvas.

We should also have a copy of the Bible at hand for each lecture.

*Students are expected to refer Briercrest Seminary's Format and Style Guides and Guide for Writing Research Papers, available as PDF documents here: <http://briercrest.ca/current/seminary/academics/important-documents/>.*

*These texts are available in store and online at the Briercrest Bookstore: <http://briercrest.ca/bookstore>.*

*Students are responsible for course materials and communication on Canvas (<https://briercrest.instructure.com>; cf. <http://briercrest.ca/online/canvas>) and their myBriercrest.ca email account.*

## OUTLINE OF TOPICS

Each session of our course will contain audio lectures (“Bodcasts”) and a weekly Zoom meeting. There will be questions for each section, and supplementary readings that are posted on our Canvas page.

### ***Part 1: Entering the World of Biblical Narrative***

Our initial discussion focuses on several texts from the Pentateuch and illustrates our approach in this course. As we study these examples, we are invited to bring a series of literary inquiries as we engage with the story. For example, where does a story take place, and are there any temporal indicators used? What actions does a character perform, and what kind of direct speech do we hear? Is there any deliberate ambiguity in a given scene, or instances of allusion or foreshadowing? Can you detect any shades of irony, or the use of figurative language? Does the point of view shift throughout a given scene, and whose perspective is refracted? Are there functional uses of a proper name, or any intertextual dynamics at work? Is the story told with a satirical angle, or do you note a more somber or majestic tone in a particular scene? In a longer narrative, is there new information disclosed that causes you to change your mind about a character or the significance of an event? Is there any repetition of a key word or idea, and do you notice any recurring motifs? What is the architecture or organization of the plot, and do any minor or collective characters play a significant role?

### ***Part 2: The Rebellion of Absalom***

With extraordinary range and literary energy, the story of Absalom’s rebellion in 2 Samuel 15-18 ranks as the most elaborate and extensively narrated internal political event in the Hebrew Bible. The account of the revolt—with a once-favored son waging war against his famous but failing father—is arguably more riveting than even the most sensational television series of the modern era. The story of the rebellion itself and the extended sequence wherein it is embedded (chapters 11-20) has a plethora of scandalous and sordid events. We will undertake a close analysis of this extended narrative, and attend to the many details of the story.

***Part 3: Jeroboam's Royal Drama***

One of the most misunderstood figures in the Hebrew Bible is Jeroboam son of Nebat, the Israelite monarch whose story occupies the central portion of 1 Kings. Jeroboam is usually vilified in the popular imagination, and to be sure, his twenty-two year reign is fraught with controversy and ultimately becomes the negative standard by which all other northern potentates are measured. However, a close reading of the Jeroboam narrative in 1 Kings 11-14 reveals a literary achievement of great subtlety and a highly complex characterization. In this session we will pay careful attention to the details of the Jeroboam narrative, and discover a masterpiece of theological storytelling.

***Part 4: The Career of Elisha the Prophet***

From his investiture in 1 Kings 19 to his final cameo in 2 Kings 13, Elisha the prophet has one of the most extensively narrated careers in Israel's royal history. During a particularly dark and contested era where the corrupt northern kings hold sway, Elisha enters the ideological battleground and boldly raises his voice and performs remarkable signs to stem the tide of injustice and religious inconstancy. Moving between the international stage and more domestic locales, Elisha travels widely and interacts with a host of characters from virtually every socio-economic category, visiting foreign capitals and cities under siege as well as wealthy homes and obscure villages. With actions that range from feeding a multitude to mind-reading and raising the dead, Elisha's performance eclipses that of his master and ensures a lasting place in ancient Israel's prophetic heritage, and in this session we together embark upon a literary analysis of this account.

***Part 5: The Artistic Dimension of the Gospels***

Probably the earliest of the four canonical Gospels, the book of Mark is the shortest but has a range of intriguing interpretive issues for the narrative critic. This essay surveys a number of these literary questions in Mark, such as the abrupt beginning with the tapestry of prophetic quotations and baptism by the Jordan, the sense of immediacy that pervades the early chapters, the motif of secrecy, the technique of intercalation (that is, when a narrative unit is split by inserting another scene or episode, often with an ensemble of minor characters), and the sense of an ending in 16:8 ("So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid"). Moreover, a freight of intertextual echoes create the impression of a new exodus at hand, and the lengthy flashback sequence of Herod's alarm are rich fields for narrative analysis. Along with various texts from the Book of John, this section of our course pays attention to the powerfully artistic elements of the four Gospels.

***Part 6: Parables and the Power of the Short Story***

In this section of our course we will try to capture the joy of discovery that can accompany a fresh hearing of the parables that Jesus tells in the New Testament. More specifically, our primary focus is on a handful of parables that have a financial angle or involve some facet of *wealth*. Here is a really short example: *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field: someone found it, but immediately hid it again, and then, with great joy, went and sold everything in order to buy that field!"* In roughly 147 characters or less, this is a valuable introduction to the world of parables. Found in Matthew 13:44, this short anecdote is part of a collection of seven straight parables that Jesus shares in the region of the northern Sea of Galilee. At this stage in the larger narrative, there has been

increasing suspicion and hostility from the religious authorities. In response to such opposition, Jesus cleverly shifts to a different form of storytelling, making important points but with enough subtlety that the various authorities are unable to bring any formal legal charges against him. Before long, these parables start to go viral and attract increasingly large crowds as the story continues, and in this session we will explore the literary techniques of these parables and their enduring appeal.

### ***Part 7: The Odyssey of Acts***

The last session of our course examines how the book of Acts has been studied from a narrative perspective in recent years, the particular gains that have been realized, and other questions that researchers are still posing. For instance, is *persecution* a primary mechanism that drives the plot of Acts? Should it be approached as a classic underdog story, for how can a tiny and beleaguered group share a message that eventually reaches the imperial city of Rome in the closing verses of the last chapter? How should the conversion of Saul of Tarsus be interpreted, and how might the various minor characters (such as Gamaliel, the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip the evangelist, Gallio the proconsul of Achaia, or King Agrippa and his sister Bernice) be assessed from a literary viewpoint? What is the genre of Acts, how significant are the various prison episodes, what is the author's disposition toward the empire, and why does the book conclude in an apparently open-ended manner? Using our narrative-critical tools of analysis, we will read this epic as a sophisticated work of literature that is a landmark in the library of the world's classics.

### **ASSIGNMENTS**

Please submit all written assignments to the professor by email as a Word or PDF file.

#### ***Pre-Course Assignment:***

1. Three reports (single-spaced, and about three pages each) on our course textbooks (*Jeroboam's Royal Drama*, *The Rebellion of Absalom*, and *The Economy of Grace*), due at the start of the week when our first Zoom session takes place: please submit these reports not later than Monday **September 18, 2023**. These reports will discuss the content of the textbook, and provide a summary of what the student has learned (10%).

#### ***Mid-Course Assignment:***

2. End of course reflections: after our final Zoom meeting there will be an "end of course reflection" assignment (due by the end of the week: **November 3, 2023**) providing an opportunity to respond to six questions from our class discussions (10%).

#### ***Post-Course Assignments:***

3. Creative Responses: *The Workshop* (50%). During the course of our study, we will explore a series of "Workshop" discussion questions (such as: "Describe some new characters who appear in Genesis 39-41: how do these figures serve to advance the plot and illuminate qualities in the characters already introduced?" "Summarize the salient background points of David's career—from his introduction in 1 Samuel 16 up to the conquest of Jerusalem and its consolidation in 2 Samuel 10—and the circumstances of Absalom's birth." "What happens in the Greek city of Philippi in Acts 16? In

your discussion, include mention of characters such as Lydia and the jailer, as well as any important new information that is disclosed in the narrative”). The student will provide a written response of approximately 300 words for each question, and the completed workshop should be emailed to the professor as a WORD or PDF file not later than **December 26, 2023**.

4. Research and Reflection essay: (30%). This is a standard 2000 word paper, single-spaced in Chicago format to be emailed to the professor as a WORD or PDF file no later than **December 26, 2023**. Topics can include a close reading of the passages we have studied (or any other that might be of interest), strategies for preaching and teaching biblical narrative in our contemporary world, or selected topics in the history of interpretation.

## SEMINARY CALENDAR

Students are expected to be aware of the policies that govern course work at Briercrest Seminary, all of which are published in the current Seminary Calendar:

<https://www.briercrestseminary.ca/academics/calendar/>.

### *Attendance Policy*

In order to benefit fully from a seminary education, to be good stewards of time and finances, and to be considerate of their classmates and faculty members, students must be in class at every opportunity.

### *Modular Courses*

Students are expected to attend 100 per cent of each modular for which they register. If this is impossible due to extenuating circumstances, arrangements must be made with the course professor before the first day of class. If extenuating circumstances prevent a student from attending class, a maximum of one (1) full day of class can be foregone. If additional time is missed, the student will fail the course unless they first request to withdraw from the course or move the course to an audit.

### *Online Courses*

If extenuating circumstances prevent a student from attending scheduled meeting times, then up to 20% of meeting time can be foregone. Students missing scheduled meeting times should make every effort to inform the course professor prior to any time missed. If additional time is missed, the student will fail the course unless they first request to withdraw from the course or move the course to an audit.

### *Semester-Based Courses*

All students missing more than two full weeks of a particular course from registration to the last day of classes will receive an automatic fail (0%). A student may appeal a course failure due to excessive absences. Successful appeals will be granted only in rare cases where all absences are clearly beyond the student's control. Appeals must be made through the Academic Appeal Process.

### *Course Schedules*

Modular classes begin at 9:00 a.m. on Monday morning and run a minimum of 30 hours through the course of the week. The schedule is determined by the course professor. Students should check the syllabus for specifics. When the syllabus does not state class times, students are responsible to check with the professor prior to making travel plans.

***Assignment Submission***

All assignments must be submitted no later than eight weeks after the last day of class as stated in the syllabus. The correct due dates will be clearly noted in the syllabus and each faculty member will state in their syllabus how assignments should be submitted. Assignments submitted within a week after the due date will be accepted with a 10 per cent penalty. For additional information refer to the late assignment policy or the extension policy in the [academic calendar](#).

***Return of Graded Assignments***

Professors are expected to return graded assignments within six weeks of the due date. If they fail to do so, students may submit an inquiry to the [Seminary](#). If an extension is granted, the professor is no longer obligated to meet this deadline.

***Academic Honesty***

As members of the Briercrest learning community, students have a responsibility to conduct themselves with integrity and honour. Students who cheat on exams, plagiarize, inappropriately collaborate, or use generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT) without instructor authorization in the preparation and/or submission of their assignments violate the trust placed in them by their instructors, fellow students, and the seminary. Any such actions constitute a breach of academic honesty and will result in serious consequences, such as failure of an assignment, failure of a course, or expulsion from the seminary.

Plagiarism, whether intentional or involuntary, is the submission of the work of others, published or unpublished, in whole or in part without acknowledgment or proper documentation. All information, ideas and/or direct quotations taken from other primary or secondary sources must be documented appropriately. Students are responsible to ensure they are using their sources with transparency and honesty. For more details, consult the [Seminary Calendar](#). In addition to being familiar with these pages, instructors assume that you have completed the Briercrest Academic Integrity course on [Canvas](#) and understand the information contained in it.

***Academic Accommodations***

Any student with a disability, injury, or health condition (mental or physical) who may need academic accommodations (permanent or temporary) should contact the ARC Coordinator in person (L234 in the Library), by phone (1-306-801-6159), or by email ([arc@briercrest.ca](mailto:arc@briercrest.ca)). Documentation from a qualified practitioner will be required (i.e., medical doctor, psychologist, etc.). It is recommended that students meet with their professors to discuss the requirements of their accommodations (i.e., how the student will receive lecture notes, or how the professor wants to receive extension requests).