



# BIBS 317/413

## God, Suffering and Justice in the Hebrew Bible

### Distance Course Outline 2021

#### SEMESTER 1, 2021

**Videoconferences:**

Wednesday March 3, 2021 18.10-20.00  
Wednesday March 31, 2021, 18.10-20.00  
Wednesday April 21, 2021 18.10-20.00  
Wednesday May 5, 2021, 18.10-20.00  
Wednesday May 19, 2021, 18.10-20.00  
Wednesday June 2, 2021, 18.10-20.00

**Teaching Day:**

Wednesday March 10, 2021  
Anglican Centre  
18 Eccleston Hill  
Thorndon  
Wellington 6011

**Lecturer:**

Dr Jonathan Robinson  
jonathan.robinson@otago.ac.nz

“The need to let suffering speak is the condition of all truth.”

*Theodor Adorno*

“No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children.”

*Irving Greenberg*

The problem of defending the justice of God in light of the reality of human suffering, sometimes known as the problem of “theodicy”—a term coined by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), though its roots are far more ancient—raises serious questions for Theology, and for the faithful reading of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. These questions are very difficult to resolve, and indeed for some, the tension between human suffering and a belief in the justice and goodness of God is too severe, and renders the faith impossible to maintain with moral and intellectual integrity. Some of the horrors of the modern world, most notably the Holocaust (Shoah) in Europe during the early 1940’s, have cast this particular theological problem into relief, for Jews and Christians who have inherited the ancient Scriptures of Israel.

With this in mind, we are going to focus in this paper on the way the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) deals with the tension between the justice of God and human suffering. Rather than trying to fit the biblical tradition into a preconceived theological framework, we will approach the subject inductively, through the careful and methodical exegesis of particular biblical texts. Some of these texts, particularly the Individual Psalms of Lament and the book of Job, are concerned with the suffering of the individual person before God. Others, such as the Communal Psalms of Lament and the Former and Latter Prophets, are more concerned with the fate of the people of Israel as a whole, against the background of the

covenant(s) between Israel and their God. Many of these texts respond theologically to catastrophes in the historical life of ancient Israel and Judah, such as the demise of Jerusalem and its Temple in 588-586 BCE and 70 CE. We will pay special attention to what is sometimes called the protest tradition, which accounts for some aspects of the Psalms and Job, as well as an important dimension of the prophetic literature.

It is not absolutely necessary to be able to read the texts in the ancient languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Syriac) in which they are extant, as they will all be studied in English translation. However, “there are now such abundant aids to the study of these languages that the biblical scholar, who by neglecting them would deprive himself of access to the original texts, could in no wise escape the stigma of levity and sloth” (*Divino afflante spiritu* §15). Courses in Hebrew and Greek are offered annually in the Theology programme, and are taught by Dr Katie Marcar ([katie.marcar@otago.ac.nz](mailto:katie.marcar@otago.ac.nz)).

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

### BIBS317

At the end of this course you will:

- have read all of the prescribed texts in English translation;
- understand the major perspectives on divine and human justice in the Hebrew Bible and early Jewish literature;
- have grasped the significance of the biblical tradition of protest, in the context of the wider biblical witness to the character of God and the role of the prophet;
- understand how early Jewish reflection on the problem of divine justice developed through time, from the fall of Jerusalem 588-586 BCE to the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE;
- have completed two written assignments, including an essay on divine justice in the Hebrew Bible and an exegesis of one biblical text relevant to this theme, in addition to a 3-hour final examination

### BIBS413

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- understand how early Jewish reflection on the problem of divine justice developed through time, from the fall of Jerusalem 588-586 BCE to the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE;
- have completed three written assignments, including an essay on divine justice in the Hebrew Bible, an exegesis of one biblical text relevant to this theme, and a final assignment focusing on a specific text or tradition relating to divine justice and human suffering in the Hebrew Bible.

## TEACHING

- Six recorded videoconference sessions on Zoom, which will be recorded and made available on Blackboard
- Teaching day, in Wellington

## COURSE STRUCTURE

### **Videoconference 1**

*Wednesday March 3, 2021*

*The problem of evil in the Hebrew Bible*

*The revealed attributes of the God of Israel (Exodus 34:6-7)*

*Divine justice and human suffering (Genesis 18:16-33)*

### **Teaching Day**

*Wednesday March 10, 2021*

*(1) Theodicy and Anti/Theodicy in the Hebrew Bible*

*(2) Theodicy and the Deuteronomistic History*

*(3) Prophetic intercession in the Hebrew Bible*

### **Videoconference 2**

*Wednesday March 31, 2021*

*The book of Jeremiah*

*The “confessions” of Jeremiah*

*(Jeremiah 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-13, 14-18)*

*Counter-voices in Jeremiah*

*(Jeremiah 7:1-8:3; 44:1-30)*

### **Videoconference 3**

*Wednesday April 21, 2021*

*The book of Ezekiel*

*(Ezekiel 14:14-23; 18:1-32; 20:1-44)*

### **Videoconference 4**

*Wednesday May 5, 2021*

*The book of Lamentations*

**Videoconference 5**

*Wednesday May 19, 2021*

*Individual Psalms of Lament*

*(Psalms 13, 22, and 88)*

*Communal Psalms of Lament*

*(Psalms 44, 74, 79, and 89)*

*Psalms of Vengeance*

*(Psalms 109 and 137)*

**Videoconference 6**

*Wednesday June 2, 2021*

*The book of Job*

**ASSESSMENT**

Essential information for the preparation of assignments can be found online on the departmental website: <http://www.otago.ac.nz/theology/study/studentresources/>

Assignments must be submitted online via the Assignments tab on Blackboard, where TurnItIn plagiarism detection software is used. You have the option of submitting a “draft” assignment to receive a plagiarism report, as well as a “final” assignment, which is the one that will be marked and uploaded to Blackboard (with a numerical mark, a letter grade, and detailed feedback from the lecturer). Please note that unless you are able to produce a medical certificate, extensions will not be granted, and a 5% penalty applies for each working day your assignment is late.

If you would like to discuss any of your assignments with the lecturer, please feel free to contact him at any time.

**BIBS317****Assignment 1 (Essay)**

**Value:** 20%  
**Word limit:** 1,500 words  
**Due date:** Friday April 30, 2021

**Either**

What theological issues were raised for the people of Judah by the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 BCE, and what range of responses is attested in the literature of the Hebrew Bible?

**Or**

What evidence is there in the Hebrew Bible for protest against apparently unjust or excessive human suffering?

*In either case, you should illustrate your essay with reference to a wide range of primary sources from the Hebrew Bible, and substantiate your argument with reference to the available scholarly literature (biblical commentaries, monographs, journal articles, and essays in edited volumes).*

## **Assignment 2 (Exegesis)**

**Value:** 20%  
**Word limit:** 1,500 words  
**Due date:** Friday May 28, 2021

Write an exegesis of **one** of the following texts, paying special attention to the historical context in which the text was written (insofar as that may be determined), and to the contribution the text makes to our understanding of the relationship between divine justice and human suffering in the Hebrew Bible.

1. Genesis 18:16-33
2. 2 Kings 17:1-23
3. Jeremiah 15:1-21
4. Ezekiel 14:12-23
5. Lamentations 1:1-22
6. Psalm 44
7. Psalm 88

*You should illustrate your exegesis with reference to a wide range of primary sources from the Hebrew Bible, and substantiate your analysis of the text with reference to the available scholarly literature (biblical commentaries, monographs, journal articles, and essays in edited volumes).*

## **Examination (BIBS 317 only)**

There will be a three-hour examination for this paper, worth 60% of the final mark. Distance students of BIBS317 will be able to take an unannotated hard copy of the NRSV into the examination with them (i.e., it should **not** be a study Bible). The venue for Distance exams is based on your Semester Address as provided in eVision, so please ensure this is kept up to date. All enquiries regarding exams should be directed to the Examinations Office ([examinations@otago.ac.nz](mailto:examinations@otago.ac.nz)), not to the Theology programme.

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**BIBS413**

There are three internally assessed assignments for this paper, and no final examination.

**Assignment 1 (essay)**

Word limit: 3,000 words  
Value: 30%  
Due date: Thursday April 1, 2021

With reference to specific examples drawn from across the Hebrew Bible, explain what the biblical tradition means by the idea of “justice.”

**Assignment 2 (Exegesis)**

**Value:** 30%  
**Word limit:** 3,000 words  
**Due date:** Friday April 30, 2021

Write an exegesis of **one** of the following texts, paying special attention to the historical context in which the text was written (insofar as that may be determined), and to the contribution the text makes to our understanding of the relationship between divine justice and human suffering in the Hebrew Bible.

1. 2 Kings 21:1-16
2. Jeremiah 20:7-18
3. Ezekiel 18:1-32
4. Lamentations 5:1-22
5. Psalm 22
6. Psalm 73
7. Psalm 109

*You should illustrate your exegesis with reference to a wide range of primary sources from the Hebrew Bible, and substantiate your analysis of the text with reference to the available scholarly literature (biblical commentaries, monographs, journal articles, and essays in edited volumes).*

**Assignment 3**

This assignment is an extended essay, for which you will need to engage in detail with the biblical text and with a broad range of available scholarly literature, such as biblical commentaries, monographs, journal articles, and essays in edited volumes.

The second option for this assignment is specifically geared towards PGCertChap, PGDipChap, MChap, and PGDipMin students (though they may select the other option instead if they wish).

*You should search the available library databases for biblical commentaries, monographs, scholarly essays and articles, and other relevant works to support your discussion.*

**Value:** 40%  
**Word limit:** 4,500  
**Due date:** Friday May 28, 2021

### Either

“The transformation of rage into righteous anger is a function of the theology of covenant” (Blumenthal 1993: 107). Critically discuss David Blumenthal’s claim, with reference to specific examples drawn from the biblical tradition of protest.

### Or

Illustrating your essay with appropriate examples from the book of Psalms and other biblical traditions, discuss the role of lament in the theology of the Hebrew Bible.

### Or

Discuss the legal metaphor in the book of Job, as a response to the perceived disjunction between the justice of God and the unjust suffering of humans such as Job.

### Or

[PGCertChap, PGDipChap, MChap, and PGDipMin students]

With reference to specific texts from **either** Psalms **and/or** Lamentations **and/or** Job, discuss how one might draw upon the various perspectives on human suffering found in the Hebrew Bible in the context of pastoral ministry.

## RESOURCES

- Blackboard, the University’s online learning tool;
- This Course Outline;
- eReserve, a resource for electronic readings, which you can access via Blackboard;
- The Department’s “Study and Style Guide” which recommends students use the 17<sup>th</sup> edition of the Chicago citation style when writing essays. It is available online at <http://www.otago.ac.nz/theology/study/studentresources/>
- The website “Information and Support for Distance Students”: <https://www.otago.ac.nz/distance/current/otago697137.html>.

**Please Note:** You must have access to Blackboard and your University email address in order to complete this paper. You will receive access once your enrolment is complete. Communications from your lecturer regarding teaching matters will be provided only through Blackboard and your University email address, as outlined in the University’s Student Communications Policy, so you must check these emails regularly. eVision will also send important messages through your University email. If you have any concerns about your access to Blackboard or to other course resources, please contact the lecturer or administrative staff immediately so that these can be resolved.

## ESSENTIAL READING

Students **must** have access to a copy of the following, to which constant reference will be made throughout the course:

**A Bible.** The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) with Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books (London: Collins, 1989) is recommended by the Department, but for the purposes of this paper we will be mainly using the following extensively annotated Study Bible, based on the New Jewish Publication Society translation of the Tanakh. The [Otago University Library](https://www.otago.ac.nz/library/index.html) (<https://www.otago.ac.nz/library/index.html>) has electronic access:

Berlin, Adele, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael Fishbane, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

The Otago University Library also has electronic access to the following, which is an extensively annotated Study Bible based on the NRSV:

Coogan, Michael D., Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

The following, to which the Otago University Library has electronic access, is a good, basic introduction to the themes and texts we will be covering in this paper:

Crenshaw, James L. *Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

There is a Study Guide for this paper, divided into ten modules that cover all the material in the Videoconferences and Teaching Day (for distance students) and the Lectures (for campus students). This can be accessed via Blackboard. It is keyed to readings available on eReserve, to which there is a link on Blackboard, and which you should use as a basis for looking for further resources on the library catalogue. eReserve contains a large number of additional readings to support and extend your learning.

## VIDEOCONFERENCES

Interactive videoconferences enable immediate response from the teacher and other students. They are an excellent forum for discussing the issues raised and for clarifying any problems you may encounter as you work through the material. For the method to be successful, it is essential that everyone participates fully. Videoconferences are not lectures, where the teacher delivers a monologue, nor are they a dialogue with one person in the group. They are intended to involve you in careful listening and active participation.

**How should students prepare for each videoconference?**



An interchange of views and reactions to the study material is an important aspect of each videoconference. Each participant brings a unique combination of prior experience, study and theological perspective to the sessions, and each participant is a resource for the group as a whole. In this kind of learning situation it is important that students prepare well, not only to engage meaningfully with the study material, but also to be ready to state and support their own viewpoints in dialogue with the whole group. A briefing about the next videoconference, and any reading that needs to be done, will be circulated by email the previous week. The most important thing is to ensure that you have read the biblical texts specified in the “Course Structure” section of the Course Outline, above, ideally with the accompanying notes in either *The Jewish Study Bible* or *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.

### Accessing the Videoconferences

Attending videoconferences is a requirement of taking this paper. If you are obliged by circumstances beyond your control to miss one, you may find a recording of the videoconference on Blackboard, under the “Zoom Videoconferences” tab. Here you will also find instructions on using Zoom and the URL that you need to join the sessions.

If you have any problems using Zoom, please call the ITS HelpDesk, using one of the contact numbers given on Blackboard.

Videoconference sessions will be held on **Wednesday evenings** as below:

SESSION	DATE	TIME
1	March 3, 2021	6:10 pm – 8:00 pm
2	March 31, 2021	6:10 pm – 8:00 pm
3	April 21, 2021	6:10 pm – 8:00 pm
4	May 5, 2021	6:10 pm – 8:00 pm
5	May 19, 2021	6:10 pm – 8:00 pm
6	June 2, 2021	6:10 pm – 8:00 pm

## TEACHING DAY

### Wellington

Date: Wednesday March 10, 2021

Time: 9.30 - 3.45 pm

Venue: *Anglican Centre  
18 Eccleston Hill  
Thorndon  
Wellington 6011*

## Timetable for Wellington Teaching Day

9:30 - 10:45	Session 1: Theodicy and Anti/Theodicy in the Hebrew Bible
11:00 - 12:30	Session 2: Theodicy in the Deuteronomistic History
12:30 - 13:30	Lunch
13:30 - 14:45	Session 3: Prophetic Intercession in the Hebrew Bible (1)
15:00 - 15:45	Session 4: Prophetic Intercession in the Hebrew Bible (2)

Students are responsible for arranging their own travel and accommodation for the Teaching Days.

## REFERENCING SYSTEM

For writing your assignments, the Theology Programme requires that you use the 17<sup>th</sup> edition of the Chicago Style Guide, which is the norm for many academic journals in the Humanities and is often recommended for theses in the humanities. It is available online via the university library catalogue. The Department has prepared a Study and Style Guide, which outlines the essential elements of Chicago Style and offers other advice on essay presentation. You may find it via the Theology Programme's "Essential Student Information" page: <http://www.otago.ac.nz/theology/study/studentresources/>

## SUBMITTING WRITTEN WORK

All assignments are to be submitted **electronically** via the "Assignment" feature on Blackboard by **midnight** on the due dates notified. Please do not submit paper copies. For full instructions about how to submit assignments electronically via Blackboard as well as other important information on plagiarism, grading, and deadlines, please see the "[Essential Student Information](#)" web page on the Theology programme website.

## ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Academic integrity means being honest in your studying and assessments. It is the basis for ethical decision-making and behaviour in an academic context. Academic integrity is informed by the values of honesty, trust, responsibility, fairness, respect, and courage. Students are expected to be aware of, and act in accordance with, the University's Academic Integrity Policy.

Academic misconduct, such as plagiarism or cheating, is a breach of Academic Integrity and is taken very seriously by the University. Types of misconduct include plagiarism, copying, unauthorised collaboration, taking unauthorised material into a test or exam, impersonation, and assisting someone else's misconduct. A more extensive list of the types of academic misconduct and associated processes and penalties is available in the University's Student Academic Misconduct Procedures.

It is your responsibility to be aware of and use acceptable academic practices when completing your assessments. To access the information in the Academic Integrity Policy and learn more, please visit the University's Academic Integrity website at [www.otago.ac.nz/study/academicintegrity](http://www.otago.ac.nz/study/academicintegrity) or ask at the Student Learning Centre or Library. If you have any questions, ask your lecturer.

<http://www.otago.ac.nz/administration/policies/otago116838.html>

<http://www.otago.ac.nz/administration/policies/otago116850.html>

## STUDENT SUPPORT

The Essential Student Information web page provides helpful information on how to access the University Library's resources, as well as a guide to the support services available to students at the University of Otago, including the Student Learning Centre and Disability Support. See <http://www.otago.ac.nz/theology/study/studentresources/index.html>

**We recommend that you contact the Theology Programme as soon as possible if you have any problems participating in the course or accessing resources. Please remember to check your University email account regularly for updates and announcements.**

## THEOLOGY PROGRAMME

University of Otago, PO Box 56, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand

[www.otago.ac.nz/theology](http://www.otago.ac.nz/theology)