

Religious Studies 206: Sex and the Bible

Dr. Joseph A. Marchal
jamarchal@bsu.edu

Zoom Office Hours: Meeting Room details on Canvas
Initially Open: 9:30-10:15 AM on Wed and 12-12:30 PM on Fri;
Or by appointment

What does the bible say about sex? Does it say too much or not much at all? Students in this course might be surprised to find out what is and isn't in biblical texts, and how people have used these texts to talk about various sexual practices. Given the dynamic and even polarizing ways in which these materials are used in a variety of contemporary contexts, this course provides important background not only on the ancient historical settings, but also the ongoing religious and cultural debates surrounding sexuality, gender, and the body.

Fair warning: as a course not only about religion, but also about sexual practices, ideas, and arguments, this course is certain to offend virtually anyone at some point or another! This course asks students to struggle with difficult materials, to read and think carefully about them, and then to discuss and write about them. Thus, this course is demanding in at least these two ways. This is to be expected, but it is also what makes religious studies so interesting and important. If you put in the work, it will be worth the effort.

To do this work, we will attend especially to the historical, literary, and rhetorical contexts and contours of biblical and sexual practices and ideas. This is traditional for a university course in biblical studies. In short, this is NOT a church or synagogue "bible study." It requires a different kind of attention and the use of key academic skills for a reading and writing intensive course. We will learn about the ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman worlds in which these materials were created, which are part of a broad heritage claimed by a number of cultures today. This gives us a basis for identifying what is distinct and specific about a number of uses for these materials and, in turn, a corresponding opportunity to weight the relative merits of certain assumptions and structures. In doing all of these things, participants will still be respectful of each other, even as they will think and argue independently, critically, and constructively with suspicious eyes and open minds.

This course may also count as a UCC-21 Tier 2 Writing (W) and International Awareness (I) Course.

Course Objectives:

- ~Gain a basic familiarity with key assumptions, patterns, and problems in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, particularly those texts that seem to be about sexual practices.
- ~Situate, link, and compare contemporary concepts and arguments about sexuality, gender, and the body, in light of contexts, *both* ancient historical *and* ongoing cultural.
- ~Foster independent, critical, constructive, and/or creative dispositions to the textual traditions, generating opportunities to consider, discuss, and write about their broader implications, historical uses, and contemporary debates.

Course Requirements (with Grading Value):

~Preparation/Participation (**12%**): This includes coming prepared to class having done the assignment and having already *thought* about it. Good preparation, thus, often involves writing notes *before* a class meeting (whether in-person or virtual). Your preparation will be reflected in independent activities (including note-taking and regular short, low stakes, in-class writing), small group work, and our larger class discussions. All of these activities will be assessed so that one can earn and then learn what letter grade is received for each unit of the course. Each unit lasts about 6 or 7 class meetings, with **six** units total. The **two lowest** out of these units will be dropped at the end of the term. (See also Attendance below.)

~4 Shorter Reflections or Paper Pieces (**12%**): These will be brief, lower stakes exercises in reflection, particularly about your encounter with the materials of this course and their relation to your beliefs and commitments, ideas and perspectives.

~3 Explanation and Analysis Papers (**35%**): These will be more important and extended opportunities to demonstrate your developing abilities to explain and analyze biblical texts and sexual topics in their proper contexts, and will be graded more closely.

~2 Tests (**16%**): These will ask students to identify major terms, figures, characters, contexts, and conceptions from the readings and course meetings. The best preparation for these will be doing all reading and writing assignments carefully, as well as listening and engaging fully with the class.

~Midterm Examination (**10%**): This will ask students to identify major terms, figures, characters, contexts, and conceptions discussed in the first half of the course.

~Final Examination (**15%**): This exam will cover all of the materials from the semester, and will evaluate whether students can use their developing academic judgment in writing and reasoning about sexual practices and biblical texts.

University Statement:

We are committed to ensuring that all members of the community are welcome, through valuing the various experiences and worldviews represented at Ball State and among those we serve. We promote a culture of respect and civil discourse. If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, please contact the instructor of record as soon as possible. Ball State's [Disability Services](#) office coordinates services for students with disabilities; documentation of a disability needs to be on file in that office before any accommodations can be provided. Disability Services can be contacted at 765-285-5293 or dsd@bsu.edu.

Student Academic Ethics Policy:

Honesty, trust, and personal responsibility are fundamental attributes of the university community. Academic dishonesty and other forms of academic misconduct threaten the foundation of an institution dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and will not be tolerated. To maintain its credibility and reputation, and to equitably assign evaluations of scholastic and creative performance, Ball State University is committed to maintaining a climate that upholds and values the highest standards of academic integrity. Visit the VPAA's [academic integrity website](#) (Students tab) for resources on understanding academic integrity, citing sources properly, and avoiding inadvertent

academic dishonesty. To learn about BSU's academic integrity expectations and students' rights, please read the University [Student Academic Ethics Policy](#).

Academic integrity violations include giving or receiving an unfair academic advantage (cheating), presenting someone else's ideas or work as your own (plagiarism), and falsifying academic records. Unless otherwise indicated, you must work independently by yourself. Check with me if you are unsure whether something constitutes academic dishonesty.

No Use of Generative AI Permitted

Given the above policy, all work conducted and/or submitted in this course must be your own, completed in accordance with the Ball State University's [Student Academic Ethics Policy](#). You may not collaborate with or make use of ChatGPT or any other generative AI applications at any time to develop materials submitted in this course. This is one version of presenting others' work as your own (see above).

In plainer terms: lying, cheating, and stealing are wrong. Representing the work of others as your own in any way is an instance of lying, cheating, and/or stealing and is also therefore wrong.

Think for yourself, learn from our course resources as best as you can, so you can think for yourself more, and thus more clearly and honestly. Plenty of forces in the world are trying to steal these things from you – do not let them.

The Learning Center:

The Learning Center offers free Tutoring and Academic Coaching for many courses at Ball State. Students can make appointments for online (Zoom) or in-person (NQ 350) appointments. To make an appointment, visit myballstate.bsu.edu and click on "Navigate" in the Academic Tools section, or just go directly to bsu.navigate.eab.com.

The Writing Center:

All writers improve with practice and feedback, so as a student in this course, you are encouraged to use the Writing Center (in Robert Bell 295 during weekdays, Bracken Library First Floor West in the evenings, or online during any of our regularly scheduled hours) to get additional feedback on your writing.

The Writing Center offers free planning, feedback, and accountability sessions (in person and online) to all students composing essays, reports, reflections, research projects, web content, lesson plans, slideshows, poster presentations, resumes, and other digital or print texts. To schedule a free appointment to discuss your writing, go to bsu.edu/writingcenter. Online and in-person appointments are available; however, plan ahead because appointments book quickly!

The Basic Needs Hub:

If you are having difficulty affording enough food, do not have a safe and reliable place to sleep, and/or experiencing an emergency or crisis, help is available through the [Basic Needs Hub](#). The Basic Needs Hub has information, resources, and provides individualized support to students. To talk with a supportive staff member about your experience, receive one on one assistance, or learn more about resources, you can submit a [Basic Needs Assistance Form](#).

Attendance and Making Progress in Times Like These:

Students are expected to attend all of their classes. A missed class meeting should be a relatively rare exception.

As most of the goals and descriptions for this course indicate, your participation and engagement are essential for this class. Success in this course depends upon a regular ability to prepare, think about what you prepared, and engage with others.

These are, of course, irregular times. When you are healthy and not exposing yourself or others to risk, you should maximize your chances at success by attending and arriving to meetings on time and ready to engage. In the rare instance when you need to miss an in-person class meeting, please let me know as soon as possible. The last few years have taught all of us to be flexible, but also to appreciate opportunities to do things that matter when we have them. Religion matters in SO MANY ways in the world right now. I promise to work with each of you to provide ongoing learning opportunities over the entire semester; I hope you can promise to try your best in admittedly difficult circumstances. We will continue to measure your learning progress in a realistic manner and, where necessary, advise when the lags or lacks in that progress become significant and need reassessing.

General Expectations:

All students will be expected to treat each other, the professor, and themselves with courtesy, respect, and dignity. In these times we all could use a bit more grace and patience with and from each other too. Please consider how your actions can help reduce the risks for yourself and all those around you (including your classmates). Let's aspire to these considerations and make our limited time together seriously fun.

Disruptive or disrespectful behavior of *any* kind in class (whether it be eating, making excessive noise, talking over another person, ringing or audibly vibrating electronics, or *most seriously* not observing university COVID protocols) will negatively affect one's final course grade. Unless previously arranged, open laptops, tablets, or smartphones are not permitted during class meeting time. Thus, we have a strong preference that you use the paper version of the main course textbook. If you have already acquired the digital version, we may ask you to sit in parts of the classroom where your device will not distract other students. The professor reserves the right to determine what actions count as disruptive or disrespectful.

Students will be responsible for obtaining, reading, retaining, and bringing all readings for the week to class meetings. The two required texts (besides the electronic resources) are available at the campus bookstore (and surrounding bookstores). Do not wait to acquire these materials.

A Word (or More) on Sensitive Subjects:

By its nature, the topics of this course often involve sensitive, personal issues that might challenge, excite, disturb, turn on, turn off, or otherwise generate discomfort. Some of these can even happen simultaneously, and what pleases you might make someone else turn green (and vice versa). All of this is to be expected; we do not need to reach for consensus in this course or settle difficult issues. This might prove trying to some or even all of us sometimes. Yet, this is also the excitement of the course and the questions raised. Many of us struggle to understand, in the best sense of both of these words.

As a result, in our class sessions and beyond, I ask you to be sensitive to these difficulties that you or others might be experiencing. Use good judgment about discussing particulars of other participants' in-class comments to those outside of our class meetings. In-class, we can all act respectfully without agreeing and all should be involved without thinking the same way or same thing. If you become aware of heightened personal, emotional, or political reactions in our shared learning experiences, please also operate with a "benefit of the doubt" toward others, who may be doing their best to figure things out from their own perspective(s) (just like you are, from another perspective).

Required Texts:

~*SBL Study Bible* (NRSV) (YES! You really do need THIS particular Bible.)

~Jennifer Wright Knust, *Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire* (New York: Harper One, 2011).

~Other required (and some optional) reading will be posted to the course Canvas site.

Be sure to check this out as soon as possible and let me know of problems in the first 2 weeks of our meetings. Beyond this, technology problems or user errors will not serve as legitimate excuses for the lack of preparation by participants. Please plan ahead!

Outline of Assignments Schedule (with course meeting dates, all subject to change):

Unit 1: Biblical/Sexual Beginnings

W, Jan 7: Read the course syllabus, then reflect on whatever background information or experience you have with matters biblical and/or sexual. **Reflection Essay 1** due at the start of our class meeting!

F, Jan 9: Read the first two pages of the "Introduction to the HarperCollins Study Bible" (pp. xiii-xiv), and the "Names and Order of Books of the Bible in Several Traditions" (pp. xxxi-xxxiii) and then browse the *HarperCollins Study Bible* in general (especially the front and back pages).

M, Jan 12: Read (or re-read) the course syllabus and the brief assignments from HCSB. Prepare for a **Quiz** on the syllabus and first readings.

W, Jan 14: Read Knust 1-17. Digital version: The start of "Introduction" up to "A Few Fantastic Things."

F, Jan 16: Review Knust 1-17 (Digital version: The start of "Introduction" up to "A Few Fantastic Things"), then skim the table of contents and any sections that interest you. Reflect more upon what you do and do not know about matters biblical and/or sexual.

W, Jan 21: The "Sex Talk" Questions/Conversations

F, Jan 23: Read "A Student's Guide to Reading about Sex & the Bible" (on Canvas)

Unit 2: A Promiscuous Bible

M, Jan 26: Read Song of Solomon/Songs 4:1-8:14. (Use the guide from Fri to help.)

W, Jan 28: Read Knust 23-33. Digital version: The start of Chapter One up to "But Ruth Clung To Her." Try writing a simple thesis statement about this reading helps to explain the previous reading in Song.

M, Feb 2: Read Ruth (the entire book of Ruth; it's just four chapters long)
 W, Feb 4: Read Knust 33-39. Digital version: Chapter One: "But Ruth Clung to Her" up to "Your Love to Me Was Wonderful."
 F, Feb 6: Review; **Short Writing Assignment** due at the start our class meeting!

Unit 3: Property and Penetration

M, Feb 9: Read the Halperin and Skinner excerpts (Canvas; see also Kamen and Levin-Richardson excerpt).
 Tu-W, Feb 10-11: Office Meeting days! (More details to come.)
 F, Feb 13: **Test 1**

M, Feb 16: Re-read the Halperin and Skinner excerpts, and reconsider any of our biblical readings so far. (Bring your study bible with you to class.)
 W, Feb 18: Read Deuteronomy 21:10-21; 22:13-30; 24:1-5; and 25:5-10.
 F, Feb 20: Read Knust 61-64. Digital version: Chapter Two: "Protecting Virgin Property" up to "Jesus of Nazareth and Biblical Marriage Reconsidered"

M, Feb 23: Read Romans 1:16-32; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8; and Ephesians 5:21-6:9; consider them especially in the light of the context provided by the Halperin and Skinner excerpts.
 W, Feb 25: Read Knust 87-92, and 94-101, and continue preparations for Paper 1. Digital version: Chapter Three: "Putting His Penis in the Wrong Place" up to "Waiting on the Lord," then "Desire and the Christian Household" up to "Masters Who Are Above Reproach."
 F, Feb 27: Review; **Paper 1** due at the start of our class meeting!

M, Mar 9: **Midterm Exam**

Unit 4: Biblical Marriage

W, Mar 11: Read Genesis 1:1-3:24; and 29:15-30:24.
 F, Mar 13: Read Knust 47-56. Digital version: Chapter Two from its start up to "Moses and Biblical Marriage Laws."

M, Mar 16: Midterm Reflection and Review; think about future writing plans.
 W, Mar 18: Read Matthew 8:18-22; 10:34-39; 12:46-50; and 22:23-33.
 F, Mar 20: Next **Shorter Writing Assignment** due at the start of our class meeting!
 Review and reflect upon course materials, and continue preparations for Paper 2.

M, Mar 23: Read and compare Mark 10:1-12; Matthew 19:1-12; and Luke 16:1-18.
 W, Mar 25: Read Knust 64-66, and 69-77. Digital version: Chapter Two: "Jesus of Nazareth and Biblical Marriage Reconsidered," up to "The End of Marriage," and then "Jesus and the Sanctity of Marriage," up to the end of the chapter.

Unit 5: Celibacy and Other "Strange" Practices?

F, Mar 27: Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-7:40; Matthew 19:1-12; and reconsider the gospels.

M, Mar 30: Read Knust 79-86, 110-112, and 66-69. Digital version: Chapter Three: from the start up to “Putting His Penis in the Wrong Place,” then “Seven Days of Sex” to the end of the chapter, and then Chapter Two: “The End of Marriage,” up to “Jesus and the Sanctity of Marriage.”

W, Apr 1: **Paper 2** due at the start of our class meeting! Read and plan ahead.

F, Apr 3: Read Genesis 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 11:1-16; and Jude

M, Apr 6: Read Knust 153-162. Digital version: Chapter Five: from the start up to “The Watchers and the Men of Sodom.”

W, Apr 8: Read Genesis 19:1-38; review and reflect upon course materials in preparation for Test 2 (and to build up, revise, or develop plans for your Paper 3)

F, Apr 10: **Test 2**

Unit 6: Assault and Insult

M, Apr 13: Read Judges 19:1-21:25; revisit (and compare?) Genesis 19:1-38.

W, Apr 15: Read Knust 162-173. Digital version: “The Watchers and the Men of Sodom,” up to “The Holy Seed of Israel.”

F, Apr 17: Review and bring paper plans for Paper 3 to class meeting!

M, Apr 20: Bring paper drafts for Paper 3 to class meeting! Then, read as much of the following as you can: Genesis 34:1-31; Joshua 2:1-24; Ezekiel 16:1-58; and Hosea 2:2-23 (and consider other, previous readings with similar tendencies).

W, Apr 22: **Paper 3** due at the start of our class meeting! Read ahead, or at least plot ahead for the remainder of your semester.

F, Apr 24: Read Knust 113-118, 131-136, and 150-152. Digital version: Chapter Four: from the start up to “Prostitutes of Baal,” then “Rahab the Prostitute and the End of Canaanites,” up to “Yhwh and His Asherah,” and then “The Bible’s Sexual Politics” to the end of the chapter.

M, Apr 27: **Reflection Essay 4** due at the start of our class meeting; Final Review Day!

Final Examination: Friday, May 1, Noon – 2 PM

Have a great summer!