UNDERSTANDING AND USING THE PSALMS  
(OT 232)

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 (including reading some ancient Near Eastern psalmic materials), 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 these books and to hear God's word for today speaking through them.

Required Textbooks:

1. *The Bible*. NASB, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, NJPSV, NLT are recommended English versions. Use of the Hebrew Bible is encouraged, though not required.


Supplementary Textbook:


Course Requirements:

1. **Reading, Class Preparation, and Discussion (30%)**

   **A. Book of Psalms:** The Book of Psalms will be read through twice in its entirety. Once, you should read it through in large sections, each in one sitting. This will be accounted for by a written statement from you affirming that you have done the reading in its entirety, according to the following schedule:
   - Psalms 1–72: Sept 6
   - Psalms 73–150: Sept 7
   A second time, you should read the book more slowly, roughly 10-11 psalms per day, from September 7-21. 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: September 14
   - Psalms 73–150: September 21
   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, special instructions will be given as to how they are to be read.

   **B. Required Textbooks:** Portions of Kidner, and all of Peterson & Richards and Longman will be read, according to the schedule below. You may account for this reading using the forms at the end of the syllabus.

   - **Sept. 6: Peterson and Richards, pp. 1-63**
   - **Sept. 7: Kidner, pp. 1-46**
   - **Sept. 11: Longman, pp. 9-149**

   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:** 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. In addition to the
essays indicated on the schedule below, you should read the following essay by Monday, Sept. 10:


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 (60%)

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 the beginning of class time on the day assigned. Late papers will be penalized proportionately. The due dates are as follows:

   Topical Paper: September 14
   Exegetical Paper: September 21

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%)

At the end of the course, you will write an essay during the final hour 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.
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


Psalms of the Ancient Near East


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)

Messianic Psalms
Imprecatory Psalms
The Use of the Psalms

Psalms Covered:

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

- Psalm 1
- Psalm 2
- Psalm 3–4
- Psalm 7
- Psalm 8
- Psalm 30
- Psalm 32
- Psalm 33
- Psalms 42–43
- Psalms 46–48
- Psalm 51
- Psalm 88
- Psalm 93
- Psalm 100
- Psalm 109
- Psalm 113
- Psalm 110
- 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 all of the assigned reading in Peterson and Richards (pp. 1-63).

SIGNATURE ______________________ DATE: ____________

READING REPORT # 2

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 # 3

By signing my name below, I affirm that I have read all of the assigned reading in Longman (pp. 9-149).

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 (Howard, 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 no larger than a 12-point font (if a computer printer is used); dot-matrix printers are acceptable, provided a dark ribbon and “letter-quality” print mode are used. Please number the pages, use a “ragged right” margin (i.e., not justified right), 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.