

Course Name and Number:

**Literary Approach to the Bible** - Dr. Zvi Shimon

01-010-80/81

**Type of course:** Lecture

**Year of Studies:**2015-2016 **Semester:** Spring **Hours/credits:** 2

**Course Description:**

The course explores the Abraham cycle of narratives (Gen. 11:27- 25). The narratives will be examined from a modern literary perspective and in light of their Ancient Near Eastern background. Our examination will emphasize the methodological differences between varying exegetical approaches such as midrash, medieval Jewish exegesis and modern literary methods. We will examine the overall structure of the Abraham cycle of narratives as well as the structure of the individual narratives. Emphasis will be placed on literary features such as chiastic structure, wordplay and contrast and the relationship between the literary form of the narratives and their meaning. We will trace the development of the covenantal relationship between God and Abraham and attempt to understand the nature of the "*berit"* (covenant) and the reason for the double covenant – covenant of the pieces (Gen. 15) and the circumcision covenant (Gen. 17). Attention will be given to the central role played by Lot in the narratives and the ongoing disagreement amongst scholars in evaluating his character. Critical approaches to the behavior of Abraham and Sarah, such as that of Nachmanides, will be considered in comparison to alternative exegesis. Using modern philological, literary and analytical tools, we will appreciate the beauty, complexity and the theological message behind the Abraham cycle of narratives.

**Detailed Lesson plan:**

Genesis 11:27- 12: Terah's Journey and Abraham's Journey

The boundaries of the Abraham narrative – beginning and end. The literary character of the Abraham narrative as opposed to the Jacob and Joseph narratives. The theological significance behind the idea of a chosen nation. The shift from universal primordial stories to the concept of a chosen nation. Why is there no background or justification in the narrative to the selection of Abraham (as opposed to the selection of Moses). Contrasting journeys of Terah and Abraham. Immigration and emigration. Evaluating Abraham's sojourn and behavior in Egypt - Nachmanides and alternative explanations.

Genesis 13-14: The Relationship between Abraham and Lot

The role of Lot within the Abraham narrative. The gradual deterioration of the relationship and its causes. Contrasting Abraham and Lot (Gen. 13). Consequences of

Lot's choices as depicted in Gen. 14. Evaluating Abraham's intervention. The role of Malkitzedek in the narrative. The relationship between chapters 13 and 14.

Genesis 15-17: The Covenantal Relationship

The covenant of the pieces (*Berit bein habetarim*). Offspring and land - the two components of the promise. The symbolism behind the covenant. Why two covenants? The giving of Hagar to Abraham – the relationship between divine promise and human initiative. The treatment of Hagar by Abraham and Sarah – Nachmanides and other approaches. The contrast between Sarah and Hagar. Abraham and Sarah's change of names.

Genesis 18-19: The Angels' Visit to Abraham and to Sodom

The boundaries of the narrative and overall structure. Parallels between chapters 18 and 19 – "parallel panels". Tri-partite contrast between Abraham, Lot and Sodom. Sarah's laughter compared to Abraham's laughter. *Tzedakah* and *Tzeakah*. The *mishpat* motif. The use of time for characterization – night and day in the narrative. Evaluating the character of Lot. Intertextuality in the Bible – narrative analogy between Lot and Noach.

Genesis 20: Abraham's Sojourn in Gerar

"My Sister" narratives and different approaches to the phenomenon of parallel stories. Avimelech in comparison to Sodom – different conceptions of gentiles. Abraham's interventions on behalf of other nations throughout the book of Genesis.

Genesis 21- 22: The Birth of Isaac and the *Akedah*

The contrast between Isaac and Ishmael – *Yitzchak* and *metzachek*. Two parallel tests of Abraham regarding his sons – *"akedat Ishmael"* and "akedat Yitzchak".The development of the covenantal relationship between Abraham and God following the binding of Isaac.

Genesis 23- 25: The Conclusion of the Abraham Cycle of Narratives

The acquisition of Maarat Hamachpela – human initiative in accomplishing the divine promise. Attitude of Abraham's neighbors in comparison to Lot's Sodomite neighbors. A suitable wife for Isaac – character traits in contrast to religious beliefs. Use of conventional type-scenes in characterizing Rebekah. Abraham's death.

# Select Bibliography

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